

鋼殻のレギオス VII

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「上手にエスコートするのが一流の紳士だそうですよ」

鋼鉄のレギオスⅢ
ホワイト・オペラ





「ここが、いまのレイフォンの……」



Prologue

The world before her was a world of sound. The endless sound of hammering, the furious howling of a mad storm, the roaring of Military Artists. A song of clashing Dites echoed in her ears. She felt as if she was very close to that place, as if she could reach the people there. Leerin then realized that she hadn't moved. She had been waiting.

The feeling differed from the time in the past when she had to hide in a shelter during a wave of assaulting filth monsters. The protection executed by the Heaven's Blade successors prevented the people of Grendan from really feeling the threat. The people only hoped for a quick end to the battle so they could return to their daily lives. The feeling today though, was different.

It was the tension brought by being in a war zone, as if time had slowed.

She was in the Academy City called Myath, and the other city that drew near was.....

(I can see Layfon very soon.....)

Zuellni. The Academy City that Layfon was in. It hadn't been a year since Leerin and Layfon parted at the roaming bus station. She never thought she'd experience this sense of agony again, but now..... She knew the term that explained her current feelings, but she couldn't say it. Now it seemed she wanted to put a full stop on it. If she were to make a wish, she'd wish to return to the past. She'd pray everyday even though she knew it was useless. She wanted to return to that time when everyday sparkled and shone. Her adopted father, Layfon, all the brothers and sisters at the orphanage, and the occasional visits from older brothers and sisters who came with presents..... Praying helped her to suppress the stirring inside her, to help her forget that feeling.

(But.)

Very soon, that feeling and that hope would come to an end.

Because Zuellni was right before her.

Chapter 1: Either way, I won't say it

In the end, nothing was explained about the disappearance of Nina Antalk, how she returned, or about the time she was away when Zuellni went on a rampage. It must have been because of the Haikizoku. It wasn't that hard for Naruki to figure out. She had understood the gist of things when she fought the 10th platoon. Some strange existence that resembled an animal had possessed Dinn Dee, and the leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang, Haia, had called it the Haikizoku. An electronic Fairy of a ruined city that held a heart full of hatred against filth monsters. It gave its power to strong-willed Military Artists. An insane Electronic Fairy.

Dinn hadn't resisted that power, and he now lay in the hospital, his consciousness gone. He had the strong will to protect the city but he didn't have strength to realize his dream. He had taken illegal drugs to strengthen his Kei vein, and he was then possessed and controlled by the Haikizoku. A real pity.

But the current Naruki could now understand Dinn's feelings. Zuellni going on a rampage had greatly saddened her. The reason behind the numerous filth monster attacks was a secret to many people, but Naruki, having entered the 17th platoon, saw Layfon's reaction. When he heard news of Nina's disappearance, that reaction of his wasn't just simple anxiety. He hadn't gone to school, and when Naruki occasionally ran into him, all she saw was tiredness on his face. He didn't even have the strength to cover up his exhaustion.

In the days when Nina wasn't around, Naruki directly felt the power of Layfon and those who were on about the same level as him. They weren't afraid even when they were facing filth monsters head-on. Layfon continued to fight with an overwhelming power. And because Naruki was assigned with him, she saw the intensity of his fighting and his exhaustion.

Naruki had participated in two fights against filth monsters since the time the Student President had called all students together. During the first time, she had received the order to retreat to Zuellni. A filth monster that could speak human languages had appeared and quickly disappeared like lightning. The second time was when Nina returned. Naruki was given the assignment to stop a filth monster's movements. That action of binding the filth monster for one short moment was extremely important, and it also took everything Naruki had to execute. Whereas Layfon managed to fight

countless number of filth monsters and destroy most of them at the same time.

Dinn must have felt this sense of impotence a long time ago, the impotence that Naruki had felt in battle. Hence, in order to reach his goal, Dinn had to train himself daily and endlessly..... To the point of using Kei vein drugs and ending up bringing himself a sad ending.

Naruki wouldn't choose his path. Besides, she belonged to the City Police. Her wish was to graduate and join the Police Force in her home city. Witnessing Dinn's end, an end that failed to protect anything, had deepened Naruki's denial of Dinn's chosen path. She wouldn't take his road because she didn't have the confidence to see a different ending.

Zuellni's rampage stopped on the day of Nina's return. Considering how Zuellni went on a rampage on the day of Nina's disappearance.....

(The Captain knows something.)

And.....Naruki also thought of the Haikizoku. It must be linked to Zuellni's past condition. Perhaps the Haikizoku's hatred against filth monsters had caused Zuellni to lose control and head for filth monsters. No matter how bad the Haikizoku was, no matter how mad it was, it was in essence an Electronic Fairy.

(The Captain must have done something on the day when she went missing.)

A wave of cheering spread out in the sports hall, pulling Naruki back to reality.

It hadn't been a week since the wave of filth monster attacks. An audience stand was built in the sports hall, since the hall was also used by other societies. Naruki came here today to cheer in a certain competition.

"Ah, the White team has won two rounds," Harley said in quiet despair.

"The White team does have the advantage at first, but it's about time....." Sharnid called as he watched the arena.

Layfon, Felli and Dalshena were also here. The groups of people among the audience stand watching the fight were all platoon members or people related to the platoons.

Nina was in the arena.

"But what's the point of holding a match at this hour? I haven't heard of such an activity before," Dalshena said, cheering for the Red team.

Nina was waiting to enter the match as the 7th member of the Red team. All Captains from the 1st to the 17th platoon were fighting in an elimination match in Red and White teams. Without the Captain of the 10th platoon, the count of the remaining Captains numbered 16. Naturally, the captain of the Red team was Vance, and the position for captain of the White team fell on Gorneo. The rest of the captains drew lots to determine the order of their matches. The choice of the lead attacker was decided by the rank of previous platoon matches. And the result of who went on which team came about by nothing but chance.

"Well, let's just call this the festival to the conclusion of the platoon matches."

"Just for that? They have time for this when time is all we don't have."

"There must be some consideration behind it, for example, assigning whom to what position....."

"Didn't we already know that during platoon matches....."

The conversation between Sharnid, Dalshena and Harley quieted down after the signal sounded for the match to begin.

Naruki looked at Layfon. She didn't feel any doubt from him about the matches. His tension was gone. Instead, he now sat at ease like his usual self as he observed the progress of the match. It felt that he was more at ease now because Nina had returned safely. Totally different from before. Naruki wasn't sure whether her speculation was right. He had just returned to the Layfon that she knew.....He was like that originally. Too bothered by how unusual he had become, Naruki had forgotten what his usual self was like. She had lost confidence in her memory.

(Does Layfon know?)

Did he know why Nina disappeared and how Nina returned? And did the people sitting beside him know too? Felli and everyone else. Did they notice anything? Or did they already know something? Was Naruki the only person left out in the team? Her strength was the weakest in the platoon. She still found it unbelievable that she was wearing a platoon badge, so she wouldn't find it strange if they kept her in the dark.

The match had entered its second half while she was deep in thought. It was finally time for Nina to fight. The Red team's third participant had stopped the team from gaining a third loss. Nina now had to fight against the White team's 7th participant. That person was the captain of the 14th platoon Shin Kaihan.

"Ho ho, it's my first time to cross blades with you after the platoon match."

"Please look after me."

"I remember you trained with me daily when you first joined the platoon. What a tiring new member....."

That was before the 17th platoon was formed. Shin wasn't yet a captain, and as a senpai in the 14th platoon, he helped with Nina's training. Shin was the same as the captain of the 14th platoon back then. They liked to help people. That was why nobody objected to his becoming the captain. And Nina had thought she would follow him. Not only did Shin look after his juniors, but he was also powerful in strength. In truth, the 14th platoon ranked the third on the chart.

"Oh yes, I heard a talent scout had contacted Winse. I'm a bit envious. Who knows what he'd do."

Winse was the captain of the 3rd platoon. It seemed a talent scout had contacted him before the 3rd platoon fought the 16th platoon.

"But I think they actually want you more. If you're serious, the captain of the White team might get tense."

The ranking of platoon matches determined the captain of the teams. Gorneo's 5th platoon defeated Shin's 14th platoon in the match. Shin's words meant that Nina had a chance to win against Gorneo.

"Thanks for your evaluation, but....."

She was happy of his evaluation. And it meant much to her since it came from Shin.

"But.....I'm prouder of being a member of the 17th platoon."

Shin smiled bitterly, "Nina really is Nina. Well then, let's begin."

"Yes."

The match began.

Keeping a distance from Shin, Nina crossed the iron whips before her. Shin's weapon was a sword. A thin blade that was made for the advantage of its speed. Kei enveloped Shin and ran into the blade. A Sapphire Dite was good with conductivity whereas a Ruby Dite was good as a tool for creating Karen Kei. As for the last Dite of the three – its quality determined by the amount of black alloy in it – the Emerald Dite was best at gathering Kei.

Shin turned the blade upward to point at Nina. It was a posture that Nina was familiar with.

(He wants to win with one move.)

His upper body seemed to lean inward as his hands embraced the handle of the sword for a sudden stab.....

Here it came.

External-type Burst Kei variation – Tenha.

A move that released the Kei gathered on one point in the blade.

"!"

(Can't avoid it!)

In a swift second of judgment, Nina ran Kei through her entire body. Internal Kei variation – Kongoukei. A move that gathered Kei in the targeted area to bounce off the attack. A high level defensive move that required accurate judgment.

The external Kei rushed past the iron whips to hammer her chest.

"Urgh....." Nina moaned, unable to cancel the entire impact of Shin's attack.

"....." Shin silently observed her reaction. He usually talked a lot, but he had turned solemn the moment he stepped into battle. This side of him remained unchanged.

(But that attack.....)

A chill ran down her back.

She could evade that attack when she was in the 14th platoon and in the platoon match. But Shin had dealt an attack today that had far exceeded the speed that Nina had known.

(Has Senpai become so strong in such a short time?)

The attack she received could have ended the match if she hadn't learned the technique of Kongoukei from Layfon. She didn't even have spare time to counterattack. But Shin's attack did have a weak point.

(It takes too long to gather the Kei. He won't make it in close combat.)

Sure, his speed and power had increased, but he had spent too much time gathering Kei.

Nina ran to attack Shin's side. She would be using a move that everyone acknowledged as her special move.

(I'll show you how much I've grown!)

Shin blocked her first attack that swung down from the upper right, causing him to move a step to his right. Instead of following tradition and defending her chest with the left iron whip, Nina took advantage of force rebounded from Shin's defense and shot forth with her left fist. Shin backed off a few steps. There was a smell of something being burnt mixed into the air, a smell of the clash of a Dite and protein.....Shin's fringe had been burnt.

Nina didn't stop. Taking the advantage, she shortened the distance between them. Shin backed off a little and leaped forward within a very short distance. He executed a second Tenha before his feet touched ground.

(So fast!)

Then why did he spend so long preparing for his first attack? Was it a trap? But Nina didn't have the time to ponder that now. Her opponent had a strong defense and an impenetrable attacking power. But Nina did what she always did. Step forward! Judging that Shin's Tenha wasn't as powerful as before, she put all her strength on the counterattack. No Kongoukei.

The assault coming from her left caused pain on her cheek as if her face had been split apart. But she did feel from her right wrist that she had hit something.

"Ugh....." Shin sat down in front of her as the judge called out her victory.

"Ah, my trick didn't work," Shin stood up, swaying, his hand on his injured shoulder.

"You've become strong.....Is it because of them?" He looked at the 17th platoon in the audience stand.

"Yeah," Nina nodded proudly.

Naruki relaxed. Harley shouted in excitement. Layfon smiled.

"Ha, beautifully done."

"Shin's Tenha is used for medium distance attacks. Drawing close to him is the correct strategy."

Having heard Sharnid and Dalshena's conversation, Naruki turned to Layfon in a small voice. "Is that right?"

"Yes. Looking at his posture, I think he can shoot even faster. His steps are also firm. If the Captain chose to defend then there'd have been quite a distance between them."

"Is that so....."

Layfon's explanation helped her to understand the comments of the other two.

"But I don't know whether the Captain did think of it."

"Eh?"

"It's hard to suddenly change your tactics. It's the same for your opponent. The Captain just chose the method she's best at. The captain of the 14th platoon must have abandoned his original methods in favor of trying out a new tactic. Otherwise, his strength shouldn't fluctuate that much."

Dalshena thought Nina's quick decision was the key to the victory, but Layfon thought Nina's lack of hesitation to shorten the distance between them was it.

"Powerful strength doesn't guarantee the winning of a match, especially with the Captain."

As he finished his sentence, the announcement came for the next match. This time Nina's opponent was the captain of the White team, Gorneo Luckens.

(Does that strength come from the Haikizoku?)

Everyone could tell Nina had become stronger. Her growth didn't come from a step by step training. Naruki knew before she joined the platoon. Most of the platoons had extra training besides the regular training sessions. She had seen some people faint by training too much, and she knew Layfon had accompanied Nina with her training. The result of this match was proof of Nina's training.

.....Was it really related to the Haikizoku? Nina had stopped Zuellni's rampage.....Did that mean she could use the power of the Haikizoku?

(Is this too premature a conclusion?)

Her speculation was possible, but where was the Haikizoku if that wasn't the case? Whom should Naruki ask.....And who could give her an answer? And should she know of this? The management of Dinn left a question for her: What could she change even if she knew the truth? Who could have stopped Dinn if the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang and Layfon weren't here?

(But.....)

She couldn't just leave everything. Otherwise it was possible for Zuellni to go on a rampage again. It wasn't right to ignore the danger.

(Because normal people like Mei-chan and Mi-chan are in this city.....)

The huge noise in the sports hall once again called her attention to reality.

Both of them moved at the sound of the signal.

Gorneo was the next stockiest person after Vance. One could feel the pressure just with him standing before you. The feeling of a difference of skill and physique would have defeated Nina if she let Gorneo's aura overtake her.

(In that case!)

Nina leaped forward as Gorneo moved towards her, pulling close the distance between them. Gorneo held a fist in front of his chest, and his fist seemed to look so much bigger than his body.

(Karen Kei!)

The left fist suddenly expanded. No, it was already here.

"Ugh....."

No time to evade! Nina could only block it with her right iron whip. A huge impact. The shrill sound of metal clashing. The heat of Gorneo's Kei brushed past her face.

(The right!)

No time to breathe. Gorneo's right fist gave an even heavier blow on her left iron whip. She originally intended to swing the whip down from top to bottom, but the impact of his fist had guided her force to another direction, causing her to lose her balance and fall forward. Gorneo never once stopped. He moved to Nina's side like wind. Nina didn't even have the time to stand straight as she felt the rush of an attack behind her – a kick that could easily break a thick tree trunk. She leaped away with Kongoukei, using the momentum of her leap to touch ground and roll to her feet.

(I almost lost.....)

But her opponent wasn't without a weakness. Gorneo was readying his stance for a more powerful move. Nina stood quite a distance from him but she could still feel the pressure of Kei building up in him. It appeared the next move would be decisive.

(What kind of a move is it?)

Gorneo's weapons were his limbs. Karen Kei was a Kei technique that aided the four limbs in using rich variations of Kei. A technique that maximized the potential of close combat fight. However, this didn't mean that Gorneo was invulnerable to direct attacks.

The air called. Another left fist lashed out. It shouldn't be able to reach Nina from that distance.

"Urg....."



But she did feel the heavy blow on the iron whips crossed before her.

(External Kei?)

External Kei, the type of Kei that was famous for its destructive power. It was a simple release of power rather than a technique. Usually, Military Artists who had trained in the use of Kei could execute that move. The difference was only down to how large a scale that move would be. A normal platoon member couldn't have released external Kei that could touch Nina at this distance.

The sound of something cutting through the air and chaotic airflow should have accompanied Gorneo's move, but all Nina felt was the sudden impact on her weapons.

(As if I was really struck. How? What in the world.....)

Gorneo attacked again while she was thinking. She evaded to her right.

(Ah.....)

A heavy blow on her right side. Her knees buckled and she knelt down!

"External type Kei variation – Jaryu."

"Huh?" Naruki looked at Layfon. "You know of it?"

"I've seen it before, but the person who made that move was stronger."

"What move is it? It seems different from the usual external Kei....."
Dalshena gave her head a light shake.

Gorneo hadn't moved from his position. He dealt his blows as of a fighter training with a dummy. People could hear the sound of wind caused by his movements, but they saw no traces of any external Kei being released.

"That's Karen Kei. The Captain's tangled in small threads of Kei. Gorneo's Kei finds her through those threads."

"Threads.....?" Sharnid squinted and increased his vision with internal Kei. Naruki also did the same but couldn't quite make it out.

"Ah, you're right. There is something?"

"Yeah? So if she can see those threads, then she can see through Gorneo's attacks."

"Oh....."

Every time Gorneo swung his fist, Nina's body shook. It seemed this really had something to do with the Kei threads.

"The Captain probably knows, so she's using Kongoukei to cancel the impact."

"But she can't wiggle out like that. Same for Gorneo. He'll be fighting Vance next, so he should be preserving his strength. It's disadvantageous to drag out the fight."

"True, though Kongoukei takes more strength than Jaryu.....I see, he's only using four threads to preserve his strength. He should be able to manage more."

"Just four?"

"The person I knew could control far more but changes would occur to the threads. Gorneo's move would be useless if we can tell how it's done."

"Can you use that move?"

"Yes, but I'd end up using extra strength because I'm not trained in the use of Karen Kei. Besides, the speed isn't as fast as using the steel threads. Putting one's strength through the Kei threads isn't much but it's very tiring to use that effect to cut."

Layfon explained in a natural manner. He really did know a lot. A little bit shocked, Naruki observed his face and saw him squinting at the match.

"But if Gorneo's left something up his sleeves, then he's underestimating the Captain. I already taught her two different ways to control Kei."

Naruki returned her gaze to the match. Nina was still stuck with the iron whips crossed before her chest.

"Since she knows the enemy's position, she can adjust the Kongoukei to reduce the amount of Kei she uses. In that sense, she can defend with Kongoukei while gathering her Kei. If she wants to break this stalemate, no, if she targets her opponent, the Kei she's stored up will come into play."

Naruki couldn't see the flow of Kei that Layfon was talking about but she did see that Nina was shining faintly, and that light was getting denser and denser.

(Time to counterattack.)

As Layfon had said, Nina was slowly adjusting her defense. The iron whips were still crossed but she had pulled back her right wrist and was pushing forward her left wrist inch by inch. The crouched legs spread.

Gorneo couldn't have missed the changes that even Naruki could see. He stopped attacking. He pulled the right fist close to his body and began gathering his Kei. He wasn't planning on winning the match with just one move. Since he had to fight Vance next, he was still preserving his strength. Still, he had to take Nina seriously. She was pouring all she had into her next attack. So what should he do? Evade it or attack it head-on?

While Gorneo had stopped his attack, Nina was using this chance to store up her Kei. The pressure of her Kei sent waves even to the audience stand. Naruki had seen this two times besides that time when she joined the platoon match. To Naruki, no one was better at Karen Kei than Gorneo and Shante. Perhaps one to two other people could use it, but only Gorneo and Shante could use it in a real fight. She had heard of how difficult it was to learn Karen Kei. Understanding the theory was not enough. One must be able to freely use it.

Nina moved. Her figure seemed to vanish in one split second, leaving only a path of light. External Kei variation – Raijin.

The sound was so huge as if the sports hall had exploded, as if lightning had hit the air shield above the city. Intense flashes of light burnt Naruki's eyes. What'd happened? Naruki was dazed by that light. But the judge had declared Gorneo the victor.

"Gorneo's seen through her," Layfon said. "The Captain's posture was too easy to read. It wasn't a long distance move. Besides, according to the Captain's personality, she wouldn't have held back. Her only thought was a straight path. By understanding that, all Gorneo needed was to react by adjusting his power, speed and destructive force."

External-type Burst Kei - Karen Kei variation – Fuuja (Wind Snake).

The move that had defeated Nina.

"In Grendan, any move with the word 'snake' in it means it isn't an attack that takes a straight path. It wasn't enough to take the Captain's attack directly with a fist. The Kei released from Gorneo's fist curved around the Captain's body to hit the side of her stomach. That was what decided this match."

"But the Captain's speed was even outside Gorneo's prediction."

Vance won the next match.

"Gorneo blocked the Captain's attack, but the impact of her attack has probably numbed his nervous system."

The Red team won in the end. The platoon members cheered at their victory.

"Speaking of which, I never knew the Captain knew such a move. I didn't see her use it in the platoon matches," Naruki said.

"Ah.....She already understood the theory. She just wasn't at the level where she could execute it."

"What do you mean?"

"Low-level Kongoukei looks good on the outside. A Raijin that got stuck between good and bad would be the same as a Whirl Kei. When used properly, Raijin involves a leveling up of speed. If one couldn't use it well, might as well use Whirl Kei. That's why she hasn't used Raijin till now."

Naruki fell back into her thoughts.

(If that's the case, when was the Captain able to use the move in a real battle?)

Nina and Vance fought one and one in the last platoon match. She didn't use Raijin back then. Didn't have the chance? Or she couldn't use it.....? If she couldn't use it back then, then she must have obtained the key to use it in the time when she was missing.

(It really is the Haikizoku.....?)

Thinking on that, she missed Layfon's mumbling.

".....I did teach her Raijin, but when was it?"

"So what were the elimination matches for, uh?"

After the matches, Vance thanked the captains for their hard work and dismissed them. It was still day time and they didn't have classes. Nina announced they would continue training in the Training Complex.

"Confirmation of the strength of the captains," Nina said. Naruki could tell how tired she was by looking at the way she walked.

Both Sharnid and Dalshena seemed to immediately understand Nina's words.

"Ah, so that was done to determine which teams were to take on the infiltrating work?" Sharnid said.

"I see."

"Throwing in too much would reduce the main team's power. Too little would mean we couldn't budge the enemy defense, so exactly how much....."

"We're sure that we need at least one platoon," Dalshena cut in.

"Vance is the reserved kind of strategist," Nina said. "He won't consider attacking unless our defense is fully prepared. Under that situation, Gorneo and Shante would work as part of the defense team. As for the main fight and guarding power inside the city.....After fitting the defense, what's left would be assigned to attack. That'd leave probably only one team."

Although all captains were involved in the discussion of strategies, the final decision rested with the Captains of platoons 1-3: Vance, Gorneo and Shin.

"In that case, a team with many problems like us won't be chosen. If they work around us, that might reduce our main power. Rather than putting us in the main fight, it's better to use the 'wild boar surprise strategy'."

"Who's the wild boar?" Dalshena asked.

"The beautiful you that's in front of me," Sharnid said.

".....Just wait till we get to the Training Complex."

Layfon smiled at their banter. Felli ignored them. No. Naruki noticed that Felli's gaze flitted to Nina's back. Her face remained expressionless but Naruki felt she had a question for Nina.

(Does she doubt?)

It wasn't that unbelievable for Felli to doubt Nina. After all, she was the one supporting Layfon when the Captain went missing. No. Everyone in this team had a question for her. Their Captain had gone missing. Dalshena and Naruki weren't in the team for long but both of them were involved in the incident with the Haikizoku, and Naruki wouldn't just sit and do nothing if this was related to the Haikizoku.

(It's all right to find out?)

The others must have noticed something, but what if she found out? She couldn't do anything in response. However, Naruki's worry was taken care of when they reached the Training Complex.

"I have something to say to everyone," Nina said seriously after they all entered the training room of the 17th platoon. "A lot has happened recently. This is the first time we can now gather together. I want to say this while we're all here."

Naruki stood behind the group, so she caught everyone's reaction. They all tensed up at Nina's words. The easy atmosphere was gone. And Naruki also noticed a certain someone had already asked Nina the question, but Nina probably waited till everyone was together.

Layfon's expression was fairly stiff. He probably wanted to know what happened a long time ago, judging by his personality. And Nina's reply, "wait", made him wait till today. Did he wait because he trusted her or was he just pretending to be at ease.....Either way, Layfon's heavy feelings for Nina were real. He worried about her more than anyone else. He wanted to become her strength more than anyone else. It wouldn't be too much to call that 'love' if he was a normal person.

(Then what does Layfon think?)

Naruki thought of Meishen. She did her best to get close to Layfon, but the guy didn't react. He didn't push her away either. If the other person was schooled in the area of love, one could say Meishen had been taken advantage of, but with Layfon, it probably was just clumsiness. And

because it was Layfon, his feelings for Nina probably wasn't just simple love. At least, he himself hadn't realized.

(Why? I don't feel good.)

A feeling that her knowledge in Military Arts couldn't quite match his.

"On the day after the match with the first platoon, I received Layfon's message and headed for the Mechanical Department. What I saw there....." Nina began to explain.

Lost, she had entered the very center of the Mechanical Department that no one had ever touched foot in. She saw Zuellni and the Haikizoku, both Electronic Fairies exuding something unusual about them. She wanted to protect Zuellni, but instead, the Haikizoku took possession of her.

"So that monster is inside you?" Dalshena howled. Naruki couldn't tell whether it was tension or outrage.

"It is here, but I can't control it, and it's not controlling me."

".....What do you mean?"

"The Haikizoku's sleeping. I don't know when it'll wake, but it hasn't done me any harm for now."

Questions filled Naruki's head. Why did it sleep? How? Who put it to sleep?

".....And where did you go?" Sharnid said, scratching his head. "We didn't find you anywhere in the city. The City Police did a search too but couldn't find you. Where were you hiding? There wasn't a trace of you."

Zuellni was spacious enough to house thousands of people. It wasn't an easy task to search everywhere. But Naruki knew the City Police managed it. They managed it under unbelievable conditions, yet they failed to find her. Meaning.....?

".....I wasn't in Zuellni."

"Then where were you?"

Unbelievable. Somewhere outside Zuellni? Where? Humans couldn't survive outside the city without protective gear. Was she in another city then? How did she get there? By roaming bus.....But how did she get

back? No roaming buses came close to Zuellni during that time. And how come Nina had to get outside the city?

But she didn't speak more. "Sorry, I can't say any more."

"Why?" Layfon asked quietly.

"No particular reason. Sorry, but I'm not just keeping this from you. I'm not saying anything to the Student President either. I won't say it to anybody."

Naruki's gaze turned to Felli. The Student President's younger sister showed no signs of reaction. She might have heard already with the Student President. And Nina was refusing to speak more no matter how hard the platoon members pushed her. The training after that was conducted with an embarrassing atmosphere.

Naruki arrived at the City Police office at dusk. After the conclusion to the fight with the filth monsters, everyone was participating in city-wide training in anticipation to the intercity match. Thanks to that, the number of Military Artists helping out the Police dropped drastically. Naruki was the same. Her time at the City Police had been cut.

"You don't have to come," Formed said, preparing his lesson.

She felt ashamed. "A case doesn't choose when to happen."

"Well, it does," Formed said. He was seated at his desk with documents before him. "There are cases that only happen during this time, but there are also people who can't move because of this time. Of course, there're also those who choose not to do anything at this time."

"Just say so if you need help."

"Speaking of which, it really has been a long time since I got to sit down and do some paperwork," Formed said, pleased, but his response lacked conviction.

Only Naruki and Formed were in the office. The few number of people who came to work might be napping in the Locker Room.

".....It isn't that good to force the answer out of someone who doesn't want to say anything about the secret?" Naruki said as she placed the cup of tea she made for Formed on the table.

Formed stopped tapping his finger on the desk and lifted his head to look at her.

"I want to find out why. Am I too spoiled?"

In the end, Layfon, Sharnid, Felli and Harley all gave up on making Nina tell her secret. Only Dalshena and Naruki still wanted to make her explain it. Sharnid and Harley in particular, both of them immediately gave up asking more when Nina said she wouldn't tell them.

"As a City Police officer....."

"Eh?"

"As a City Police officer, I'd use any means to get to the bottom of things if it were to solve a case. But a secret. The person himself wouldn't want anyone to know regardless of how it is to others. It really is difficult."

"Yes....."

"But there're two kinds of secrets. One that you can't say to anyone else and one that you won't spill a word of even if you're to die for it. If it's the latter then it won't be easy to discover it. And a secret can be deep or shallow. Just like a basement. You can sometimes see to the depth of it from the entrance. There's only so much hiding in there. But it might be a basement whose depth you can't see through."

"....."

"If you want to see what's inside, you can only go in. Do you have the assurance that you can make a full retreat?"

"Well....."

"You need to prepare your heart to discover the secret of one who vows to keep it secret even in death. Can you then still fight alongside Nina without reservations?Well, if it's a secret that a police officer must know, then let me shoulder it with you," Formed said.

"Chief....."

"Isn't that what an organization is for?"

It wasn't what Naruki had expected, but it sure suited Formed's style.



Cacophonous rumbling filled the Mechanical Department. How long ago had it been since she last worked here? Submerging her body in the noise? Sighing, Nina cleaned with the mop. Her body remembered that motion. What came next was just her consciousness. Her thoughts gradually left the floor and the tubes around her.

(That was correct?)

She recalled what happened in the Training Complex. It already took her everything to tell them about the Haikizoku.....It should be right.

"You'll be involved." Dixerio Maskane had said.....His words echoed in Nina's ears. The Nina who first met the Wolf Faces and felt she had gotten caught in something. In truth, even Layfon might get caught in it if she took one wrong step.

Ignasis. Nina was now involved in the fight against that person. She still didn't know exactly what this signified and she had no idea who else besides Dixerio was involved in this war. She also didn't know which direction this fight was taking. She knew nothing. But at least she knew who the enemies were. Ignasis and the Wolf Faces. An organization whose members wore beast masks. Most of them had no real bodies, and they walked about like they were dead. Their number was increasing and they were building a network of "En" between cities. They had some conspiracy planned against the cities. And about the En between Myath and Senou City Schneibel – Schneibel was the place where Rigzario was, the device that gave birth to Electronic Fairies. The Wolf Faces' true objective might be Rigzario.

Did Nina appear in Myath because she was born in Schneibel? That alone wasn't enough to draw that conclusion. Possessed by the Haikizoku and aided by Zuellni, she managed to safely return to Zuellni. The origin of all Electronic Fairies had helped her, and that original Electronic Fairy resided in the girl named Leerin. Leerin had a guardian called Savaris, and the Wolf Faces had called him a Heaven's Blade successor.

The man knew Layfon. He seemed to have fought him too.

(What more can I say?)

If Leerin really was Layfon's childhood friend, Nina would want to tell Layfon about her. Layfon had never thought he could return to Grendan. He'd be happy to hear of her. A deeper thought asked why Savaris and Leerin left Grendan to come to Zuellni. Savaris already told her his purpose. He was here for the Haikizoku, just like the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. Then what about Leerin? And that original Electronic Fairy with her.....Yet she herself didn't realize.

(On what level can something be forgiven?)

Layfon felt nothing about the pride of Military Artists. Was it correct to get him involved? And Nina herself was forced into a fight that she knew nothing about. How much should she tell him? At what point should she stop so she wouldn't get him involved? She wouldn't tell him of what happened in Myath if she couldn't find that boundary. She felt a crisis was near but she couldn't say anything.

"Senpai," Layfon's voice called her back to reality. "It's past bentou delivery time."

".....Um. Damn."

It appeared some time had passed without her knowing. If they missed the bentou delivery time, they could only get what food was left by others. The tasty sandwiches were popular. One couldn't get one unless he remembered it and went early to purchase it.

"If it's ok with you, you can have my bentou."

"That isn't good," she shook her head. A platoon member had to train everyday, and the two of them did cleaning at night on top of training. The three main meals were important. She couldn't have half of Layfon's lunch.

"We only have a bit of time left. I'll just pass."

Layfon scratched his head in embarrassment. "Well, I made the bentou today, but I made a bit too much. So if senpai can eat some, you'll be helping me a lot."

Nina looked closely. That bentou did look too much for one person.

"I don't recall whether I've mentioned it, but I've never been good with measuring the amount of food made. It'd be great if you could eat some."

"Is that so? Well then, I'll have some....."

"Please go ahead."

Nina was urged to go wash her hands. Layfon had set everything up when she returned. He had also poured tea into paper cups.

"Time to eat."

"Don't have to hold back."

Two fairly large bentou boxes sat inside the bag. One box contained sandwiches with marinated meat, cheese and vegetables. The other box contained salad.

"It's still as tasty as before."

"Really?"

"Ah," she ate as she sneaked a peek at Layfon, and saw him smiling. She couldn't quite see his face clearly from this angle. She didn't allow herself to look at him directly because she was hiding things from him. And also, the words of the Student President remained in her head.

Karian had said that Layfon fought because he relied on her. He might be right. Nina had then said she'd take responsibility of it. As if she were making a confession.

(Geez, just what did I say?)

She had just let it burst it out. Perhaps in that moment, she wanted to convey her feelings without covering them up.



Did a part of her she hadn't developed finally take form?

(I.....)

About Layfon? There was nothing she could deny.

"Layfon.....I....."

"That's good," he cut her off. "I believe you'll tell me one day, and I'll stand by your side."

She looked at him directly. He smiled.

"If the Mercenary Gang plans something against you, I'll do everything to protect you. If you have something you want to say, then say it. I'm willing to help if I can."

"Ah....."

That was it. There still remained a reason for denial.

(I want to stand by your side.)

Not just to guard and not just within this Academy. If there was something she truly wanted to say, then she wanted Layfon to acknowledge her as a Military Artist.

"So I'm counting on you."

Nina returned the smile and dug into the bentou again.

"We'll get busy tomorrow. Oh yes, many people want to fight you in training," Layfon said.

"Really?"

"Everybody knows of your strength since the matches between captains."

Yes, she wanted to stand by Layfon's side. She wanted to bury this feeling in her, but she still felt happy to know that he had accepted her.

Chapter 2: Haia's resolve

The preparation for the intercity match had entered its formal stage in Zuellni. Many, many things needed doing: training to help psychokinesists search for the enemies and in psychokinetic control, training for the captain's strategies, training for snipers and so on. And at the same time, the Mercenary Gang was hired to help instruct the students and increase their personal strengths.

No more filth monster attacks happened after Zuellni's revival. Students in this Academy City now lived steady and peaceful lives. Layfon and Naruki came together to the Training Complex.

"Is that really ok?"

It was after school hours. The platoon matches had ended, but the platoons were still conducting intense training. The sounds of training bounced off the walls more intensely than before.

"I think so. Besides, I already confirmed with the Captain. It should be ok."

The 17th platoon didn't have training today. Nina had gone to train with the other captains, Sharnid had been called over by the sniper team, and even Felli had gone to the seminar on the assigning of psychokinesists. She was very displeased but she did go to the seminar. Dalshena didn't have anything, but recently, she had been training alone. So she might not be in the Training Complex.

"But....."

Layfon had taken this chance to bring Naruki to the Training Complex.

"Are you.....worried about the time?"

"No, Chief said this is for the intercity match, so I should spend more time training. I don't have to worry about the City Police, but....."

"Then there's no problem?"

They were heading for the training room of the 5th platoon.

"But the captain of the 5th platoon and you....."

Both Gorneo and Layfon came from Grendan. Naruki knew from long ago that they didn't have a good relationship. Still, Layfon had asked Gorneo to train her.

"But I think he's the best person to teach you Karen Kei."

Layfon had been thinking whether to add Karen Kei to Naruki's moves when she trained with Nina. Naruki's weapons, rope and baton, were best at capturing. Her strength would increase tremendously if she could add more variations to her techniques through Karen Kei.

"I know a bit of Karen Kei, but he's a better teacher."

She watched him a little and sighed. "How should I put it, I feel Layton is quite clumsy."

"Uh? Really?"

"If you're not like that, you wouldn't have put thought to action."

"But it wasn't easy to come to an Academy City to study. Wouldn't it be a waste not to take advantage of it?"

"No, they're not related.....Uh, never mind," she sighed again, followed by a deep breath to revive her composure. "It's foolish for me to get tense on my own. Let's go," she nodded.

Layfon knocked on the door of the 5th platoon. They heard that Gorneo wasn't joining the captain's training and that he was in the platoon room.

After hearing the answer through the door, Layfon pushed the door open. Only Gorneo and Shante were around.

"Want something with me?" Gorneo said with a bitter face.

"Need your help a bit," Layfon cut to the chase, making Naruki tenser.

Shante was the first to react after listening to his explanation. "Why do we have to teach you?" she bared her teeth.

He wasn't swayed. "Aren't we comrades protecting this city?"

"When did the relationship become like that?"

Shante's confrontation made Gorneo's smile bitter.

"We won't force you if you refuse."

".....Why, can't you teach her?"

"You're the only expert in Karen Kei in Zuellni. I can teach her some techniques but I can't do much about the basics."

What Layfon could do was read the flow of Kei of his opponents and repeatedly make the same move himself until he grasped hold of it. However, many of the theories of Karen Kei weren't that easy to understand just by reading the flow of Kei. That explained why he hadn't taught anyone Karen Kei. In the end, he couldn't teach others what he knew.

"So you don't know how to use Karen Kei? You monster," Gorneo said, his expression turning sour after hearing Layfon's explanation.

"I really don't know."

"Don't you know Jaryu? And you used Roar Kei and Thousand Man Rush."

They were rumors about Layfon during the platoon matches. It wasn't strange for a Military Artist to increase his strength through internal Kei during battle. What couldn't be ignored was the fact that the last two moves were high level moves from the school of the Luckens. Gorneo had heard that only Savaris had mastered those moves – Gorneo's older brother.

"Those two moves are based on the theory of Karen Kei but they aren't bound strictly to it. They emphasize less Karen Kei use and that's why I managed to learn it. I haven't learned any of the true Karen Kei techniques. Since I can't use it effectively, I don't want to use it."

His explanation seemed to have alleviated the tension in the atmosphere. Gorneo nodded. ".....All right, but I'll only teach the basics."

"Goru?!"

"This is for the city."

"Thank you very much," Layfon lowered his head.

"In exchange, I want you to train Shante."

"Eh?"

"Shante possesses an unusually large amount of Kei. She needs to be able to release it properly and control it. There's no one better at training her than you in this city."

Layfon couldn't refuse. "All right."

"No!" Shante protested. "Absolutely not! With this guy....."

"Shante....."

"Why can't it be Goru?"

"Didn't I just say it? You're one of the very few who have such a huge amount of Kei, and its amount surpasses mine. Letting Layfon teach you is the fastest way."

"I don't want to!"

She seemed to really hate Layfon. She howled in anger while Gorneo towered over her, doing all he could to placate her. The scene looked like one of a father and his daughter, or a pair of siblings with a large age gap between them.

"I want Goru to teach me. No one else!"

"Well, I guess we'll head back for now," Layfon said, for some reason getting embarrassed at the simple argument.

"Wait a bit.....Shante, if you're thinking....." Gorneo took a breath and spoke in a whisper.

".....Um."

Who knew what they were saying, except that the hate in Shante's eyes loosened and she smiled.

"If that's the case, it's not bad for him to teach me."

"Right."

"Ha.....OK, when do we begin?"

Her sudden change of attitude gave Layfon a bad premonition. But he couldn't refuse because of Naruki.

"We can start now."

Shante immediately restored her Dite. A Red Spear. A red ruby used to accelerate the flow of Kei flashed in the middle part of the point of the spear. The spear's point was probably made with hard metal as its base, its surface covered with the powder of Ruby Dite.

"OK, as you wish," Layfon pulled out his Dite.

"Layfon," Naruki grabbed his shoulder. "She doesn't look right."

"Yeah, I know," he said in a small voice.

"Is this ok? If you're forcing yourself because of me....."

"Don't worry," he nodded at her.

"Nothing will happen. I think those two are good people."

"Good people?You....."

He didn't make this up so to put her at ease. Shante just couldn't let go, and Gorneo wasn't a true villain. Even while wanting to avenge Gahard, Gorneo chose to fight him fair and square.

"OK, if you say so."

"Yeah."

Naruki backed down while Layfon restored his Dite. He held the Sapphire Dite and faced Shante.

"I want to first see how good the power of your Kei is. And it's best to see that through a fight. Do you know how to push and receive?"

"Stop looking down on me. I already learned it from Goru."

"Well then, let's begin," Layfon kept his sword in place and sat down.

Shante hugged her spear and also sat down.

"Come at me when you're ready."

"Then I won't hold back!"

An amount of Kei in the shape of a whirl suddenly appeared before Layfon. Kei gushed out of its side like smoke.

"....."

Layfon also ran Kei through his body.

The two of them continuously released their Kei into their Dites. Gathered in one place in increasing density, the Kei caused the Dites to shine. The

colors were at first light but the density of the Kei made them into a richer shade of red and blue.

"You can come at me anytime."

"So annoying! Stop talking to me!" Shante increased the speed of storing the Kei in the Dite. The heat from the Dite fogged the surrounding air.

She opened her eyes. "Enkei Shoudansen!"

The Kei shot out from her spear as she leaped up.

"Didn't I say we're doing a push and receive?"

Slightly surprised, Layfon kept his sitting pose and gave his sword a light flick. The arc of the blade cut through the air, leaving a trace of blue light and blocking the fireballs shooting at him.

"Layfon!" Naruki called.

None of the fireballs hit him, although the heat threw the air flow into chaos and tousled his fringe.

Push and receive training involved blocking and deflecting an attack using a block of dense Kei. It was a traditional way of training in Grendan, so both Derek and the Luckens used it. But Layfon didn't know that other cities didn't train like that. At least, he hadn't seen anyone using it. Maybe it was a training only found in Grendan. Another reason was that both Military Artists in the training of pushing and receiving needed to possess a certain level of strength, and these people were harder to find in an Academy City.

"Um....." he sighed in his heart the moment when he received Shante's attack. He had fought her two times now. The first time was in the platoon match, and the second in the ruined city. He defeated her quickly the first time so he didn't get to observe closely. As for the second time, Layfon was attracted by Shante's unusual movements. Her level of Kei didn't leave that much of an impression on him. Besides, she probably trained to improve her movements rather than her control of Kei.

Shante did possess what Gorneo claimed she had. Deflecting her Kei wasn't difficult. As Gorneo had said, her amount of Kei was huge but she didn't know how to control it. She used too much force. It felt like she was pouring a bucket of water into a tiny cup. She could fight this way,

exhausting her Kei, only because of the huge amount she possessed. In terms of efficiency, she was about the same as Layfon's use of Karen Kei.

(If she could control it, there would be huge room for improvement.)

It was easy to deflect and shatter her attack. Pushing and receiving involved many kinds of techniques, and this match would probably end right now if he used some of them. But Layfon waited to see what level of Kei she could reach.

The ball of flame expanded as time passed.

(It won't burn up the building, right?)

Numerous factors were taken into account in the design of the building. However, the increasing heat would probably trigger the fire alarm. Layfon adjusted his Kei like a shield around Shante's flame to prevent the heat from spreading out. He really didn't want to get hit by the chemical in the fire extinguisher.

"Uuu.....Aaaaaah....." Shante gritted her teeth and stared at him with wide eyes. It seemed this was her first time releasing this much Kei. Her strength was having trouble catching up with her releasing so much Kei over a prolonged period of time. As expected, her Kei flow started to sway, and the strength was weakening.

(About time.)

Layfon's Kei changed: The Kei flow surrounding the heat sped up, and the direction of the flow became complicated. Countless number of large whirls appeared, sucking in the flame and heat.

"Ah!" Shante sat back down. Without the Kei, the flame quickly disappeared.

"You could keep at it for longer if you released the Kei normally."

"You.....You're annoying," she staggered to her feet.

"Today is pretty much done. Do you wish to continue tomorrow?"

"You don't need to say it!"

He was worried about her condition, but her attitude showed she was ok.

"Then please help with Naruki's training," he said.

And so Naruki began learning Karen Kei from that day on.



Since that day, Haia remained in deep contemplation.

Even when Myunfa called out to him, there would be no response. With that silent figure embraced in a heavy atmosphere, she couldn't continue trying.

Usually, Haia would respond to the other mercenaries who called out to him with a carefree manner, but now that aspect of him was restrained.

The Mercenary Gang was the only family he had. Traveling on long journeys on a peculiar roaming bus, contracted to fight at various cities, and once again advancing across the wasteland, protected from the pollutants by the roaming bus.

Sharing a common fate as the Mercenary Gang, the comrades of the gang had developed a deep connection resembling that of a real family.

Haia was still young. From his predecessor directly, he learned the Psyharden art of the Katana, and after death, he succeeded him.

Even the Mercenary Gang, with Haia in that state of affairs, couldn't call out to him.

Haia's figure could be seen on top of the roaming bus. While they were at a city, if there was any free time, he would be there. If a city's lodging facilities were sparse, he preferred to remain at the roaming bus.



Normally willing and able to stand by his side, today Myunfa looked on at him from behind, unable to approach him.

"Tread lightly."

Myunfa looked back towards that dry, mechanical voice, and there stood Fermaus. As the Mercenary Gang's psychokinesist, the previous leader's partner and experienced veteran, he acted as Haia's guardian.

"Fermaus-san, what....."

Yesterday's atmosphere was good. Myunfa imposed upon Zuellni's first year students lessons, prompting Haia to smile and say, "Get Layfon to train you." Even after returning to report back, the atmosphere was still good.

And yet after one night, Haia remained motionless, sitting on the roof of the roaming bus.

"Early this morning, a letter had come from our home land."

The homeland Fermaus was talking about was Grendan. Though the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was a group of military artists for hire, more importantly they had a secret mission from Grendan's royal family.

It was a mission to find and capture the Haikizoku.

Haia discovered the Haikizoku in Zuellni and proceeded to inform Grendan by letter.

The reply had probably come that morning.

"What was the home land's reply?"

"I don't know."

Fermaus, whose face was concealed by his mask, shook his head.

"After reading it, Haia seemed crushed."

To Myunfa, it seemed as though the contents of that letter caused rancor to ooze from Haia.

"Let's wait a bit longer."

Fermaus placed his hand on her shoulder, and led her away. Myunfa reluctantly turned back to look countless times.

While staring towards the outside of the city, he didn't bother moving.



Training continued, except this training involved students other than Military Artists.

"Emergency training guide."

Sitting in the classroom, Layfon studied the guide in his hand. A few pages stapled together. No matter how he looked at it, it looked cheap. Every student received a booklet on emergency procedures when they entered the Academy. The guide Layfon held was the simplified version taken from the relevant part in the original booklet.

"Didn't we do this numerous times before?"

Normal students all headed for the shelters during filth monster attacks except for the very first attack. It had been a long while since the last mock emergency practice, so it had been chaotic, with students going the wrong way, getting lost and even getting injured. But the subsequent filth monster attacks had put the students through the routine a few more times, and they were getting better at it.

"But this is the first practice for an intercity match."

"True, true. It's different from a filth monster attack."

"Ha.....I see," Layfon flipped through the guide as he conversed with Naruki and Mifi.

"Layton, did you read it?"

"I just need to know the approximate locations of the shelters, right? I haven't looked at the map yet."

"Wa, who would have thought that Layton's so not thorough."

".....No, you must memorize it," Meishen said.

He turned his attention back to the guide in haste. Back in Grendan, the city frequently came into contact with filth monsters. There was never a war though. A war might have happened once before he became a

Heaven's Blade successor. He tried all he could to dig up that memory but all he got was a vague "seems to have been one" impression. He was still too young, before he became a Heaven's Blade successor, so he couldn't join the fight. And he had never received an order to attack after he took the Heaven's Blade.

Because it usually just took one Heaven's Blade successor to stop a war.

(Oh yes, they drew lots to determine who got to go.)

Her Majesty made the lots, and Layfon remembered that Lintence drew it. Lintence had promised to finish the fight before one o'clock, and he did.

"Intercity matches and fights against filth monsters are different. A huge number of defensive weapons are used because the main arena is inside the city. If you don't know the location of those weapons, you can't carry out your mission and you might even fall into your own trap. So memorizing those locations is part of the training today."

"But then Layfon's mission is probably to attack the other city, so training might not have much to do with you."

"I hope it'll go that smoothly," Naruki sighed. She had been training with Gorneo everyday, so she looked tired.

The alarm on the corridor suddenly rang.

"Ah~"

"It's about to begin."

The sudden alarm made Meishen shiver. Mifi didn't seem to care about the alarm. The class president stood up and guided the students to the corridor, calling loudly.

"It's nearing area B on the outskirt of the city!" the announcement repeated. "One more hour till contact."

Usually, one could discover the other city a few days ahead, allowing the city time to prepare. However, this time the city was blocked by the mountain range, so they didn't discover each other till pretty late.

"Well, time to go," Naruki stood up. Layfon did the same.

"Be careful," Meishen said.

Naruki and Layfon nodded.

"We'll head over via air. You guys take care."

"It's just emergency training. Don't think we'll get hurt," Mifi smiled as the two disappeared out the window.

Layfon followed Naruki. Naruki was better at Internal than External Kei. She was only in her first year but her footfalls in her jumps were firm. She jumped over one Military Artist after another, leaving them far behind her. All of the Military Artists headed for one direction, and that scene of their jumping from rooftop to rooftop was grand.

"I'll go meet Felli senpai," Layfon said and changed direction, heading for the dormitory of the second year. Psychokinesists were also classified as Military Artists, but their athletic abilities were the same as normal people. It took them time to reach their destination. And Felli had an important duty since she was also a platoon member.

Layfon landed in front of the building. Great timing. Felli was there.

"Seems I came just in time."

"It just happened."

He carried Felli in his arms. She was very light.

"Time to jump. Take care."

"Someone can only be called a good gentleman if he can perfectly guard a lady," Felli retorted in an icy voice.

He felt a sudden wave of weakness in his knees. His original intention was to remind her to be careful of her posture while he took off at high speed. Either way, time to go.

Felli's silvery hair danced.

"Is your body ok?"

She had fainted due to her work against the continuous filth monsters attack earlier.

"I had a good rest. It's ok," she replied in her normal voice. Layfon heard her clearly.

"Compared to me, Fon Fon, you should take care of yourself more. You were reckless."

"I had a good rest, same as you."

"Really?"

Her doubt probably was targeted at his recent training. Recently, more people had asked him for personal training. At first, Nina was the one who introduced them. But since she had gotten busy participating in strategy conferences, many people came straight to Layfon on their own. It was troublesome to find a training room for every person, so he had decided to train others once every three days. He had been training anyone who wanted to join at the Sports Hall after school.

"That's pretty relaxing."

"I hope so," Felli said and didn't say anything more.

Layfon couldn't jump at full speed as the wind pressure and impact might harm Felli. Besides, carrying a person also prevented him from moving at full speed. Knowing the difficulties, she leaned her head against his chest and didn't move. As such, he caught up to Naruki in no time.

Military Artists came to gather in area B. Of course, not all of them were here. This area contained the front line teams. Those who were assigned to defend the city were heading for their assigned positions. Most of the first year belonged to the defense team.

Nina arrived at the same time as Layfon. Sharnid and Dalshena appeared quickly too. All members of 17th platoon were here. And next came the Military Artists assigned to team 17.

Looking at them standing in a neat queue.....

(The preparation's about done?)

That kind of a feeling.

(And all we need to do is wait.....)

But when was that time going to come? Nothing was out there in the wilderness for now.



It was lunch time when Haia jumped down from the rooftop of the roaming bus. Situated in the area assigned for travelers, he could feel the enthusiasm created by the emergency training in Zuellni. How would that enthusiasm affect the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang? This thought plagued him as he stepped on an empty path. As if attracted by that enthusiasm, he leaped over walls of several different areas, avoiding the eyes of spies.

The sound announcing the noon time cut through the air. That sound seemed to calm the passion and heat of the training. It wasn't a real fight, just mock training to let everyone know what to do when the fight started. The mock training only took 2-3 hours.

The content of the letter that Haia received this morning hovered in his mind. Queen Alsheyra Almonise praised and asked after him, the leader of the Mercenary Gang. She emphasized again that the Mercenary Gang would receive appropriate compensation and status when they returned to Grendan.

In the letter was one sentence: "I'll send a sword over. Leave everything to that sword."

"Don't screw with me," he cursed. She thought he didn't have the power to capture the Haikizoku. But he might be jumping to conclusions here. She wrote this letter based on the report he wrote to her, which only informed her of the Haikizoku's existence. Still, one would normally think that a capture had been attempted by the time letter was delivered. However, the report only said that a Haikizoku existed. Zuellni's current situation might have hastened the Queen's decision. She wouldn't have left Layfon alone, the ex-Heaven's Blade successor exiled from Grendan. And Layfon knew it too. Had the Queen thought of Layfon's interference? And judged that the Mercenary Gang would lose to him? Was that why she sent a Heaven's Blade to Zuellni?

"I didn't plan to lose," Haia said in a low voice, his hands balled into fists. The fury conquering his body now burnt brighter. Yes, his Katana was broken. But he was still alive, and as long as he was alive, he couldn't lose. This was how Haia thought, a thinking nurtured and brought forth through the living style of the Mercenary Gang – one that drifted from city to city,

from one fight to another, a repetitive cycle. Layfon had shown his naivety in not killing him. A young Heaven's Blade successor who possessed the highest status and glory in Grendan tainted his title and was exiled because of his naivety. And he had abandoned the Katana, the Psyharden technique. That naivety. How could Haia lose to someone like him?

"About time to end this game."

He must settle this with him. His fists loosened. The Queen's letter might have left Grendan at the same time the Heaven's Blade successor left. If the letter had already arrived at Zuellni, then the Heaven's Blade must be near. Would there be a fight between Heaven's Blade successors? The desire to watch that fight flashed past Haia and vanished.

He would be the one to defeat Layfon.

He didn't care if Layfon had the Haikizoku. In truth, the Haikizoku that Grendan sought held little fascination for him. His adopted father had taught him that real strength came from the inside, an existence that allowed one to take and let go as one willed. Good control of that will could avoid much trouble. Anyway, accepting the strength that came from the inside was the most important. The Haikizoku went against Ryuhou's teaching. So Haia was content to leave that incomprehensible power to people who knew how to use it.

Now he only thought to defeat Layfon. His heart eased. The anger at the Queen's insult dissipated, leaving behind a clearer hatred for Layfon.

(I don't like either of them.)

He could now mock himself like before. Either way, he felt better, compared to when anger was filling his head. The time he sat on the roof of the roaming bus was to suppress his desire to fight Layfon. But it was good that he forced himself to judge properly. He knew he couldn't win with his heart like that. A heart full of anger. Even now he was doing all he could to suppress it. What was strange was that he was calmer after confirming the direction of his anger – though he was nearing his limit of endurance. He had controlled his impulse and made a serious goal. He'd defeat Layfon at a certain time. If he waited longer, Grendan's Heaven's Blade successor would be here. In that case, he would have lost his opportunity. And it would be very bad if his action was viewed as betrayal. He wouldn't bring trouble to everyone because of his spoiled wish.

"Well..... So how can I lure Layfon into a match?"

No matter how much a fool Layfon was, he wouldn't agree to a direct confrontation.

An idea flashed past him. Layfon was desperate a while ago. For what?

"Aaah, complicated things make my head hurt."

Maybe Layfon was truly just a fool.....

(Found you. What're you doing?)

Fermaus's voice came through the flake beside him.

"Good timing. I have to talk to you."

(.....Looking at you, it's not something simple and easy.)

A dry sigh from the flake.

"I'll still do it even if you think me a fool," Haia smiled as he discussed the strategies with him.

(So this is the answer after having thought of it for so long.....) Bitterness tinged Fermaus's voice.

"We've no reason to stay no matter how things turn out later. Then why not do something big before we leave~"

(According to the letter, we really don't have a reason to run after the Haikizoku anymore. Besides, that thing's whereabouts are unknown after Zuellni stopped its rampage. But we have one more thing to do before becoming just mere Mercenaries.)

".....? What is it?"

(Please don't forget the reason that holds the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang together.)

"Ahah....."

The first leader of the Mercenary Gang acted on the royal order to search for the Haikizoku, and that was how the Gang was formed. All of the present members entered the Gang for that reason. But how could they understand this mission and keep on pursuing what was so elusive? The reason laid in the huge reward gained once they found or captured a Haikizoku. Aside from the members born in Grendan, comrades who

entered from other cities found this more attractive than loyalty. The Queen's letter implied the reward was only for the discovery of the Haikizoku. The reward might be reduced for that reason but it was still a fairly enticing sum. This meant that Haia and his team could leave things now. However, that would weaken the reason behind the existence of the Gang. Those born in Grendan might decide to retire and return to the city. Others might give up this dangerous job.

"You mean.....disbanding the Mercenary Gang?"

Fermaus was once again bringing out a truth that they couldn't ignore. It didn't sit well with Haia.

(I know you wouldn't have forgotten. I just want to remind you once more.)

"How could I forget? But....."

(Haia.....) Fermaus's tone changed to that of a teacher. (You've always been a clever child. You can observe other peoples' thinking and make judgments based on it. Your strength cannot be questioned. That was why Ryuhou appointed you the next leader, and we didn't question that. But we find it hard to understand your actions since we came to Zuellni. They lack.....energy.)

"I have plenty of words with energy."

(Nonsense.) Fermaus's emotionless voice hammered Haia's reply. (Somewhere inside you, you feel fear, that's why you want to challenge Layfon. Jealousy might be it. But if it was the old you, you could look at this with peace and calm. Because in the end, we don't have a reason to provoke him.)

"That's because....."

He recalled that he failed to defend himself at that time when Fermaus scolded him.

(Fine. It's ok if you want to settle the score with Layfon. But before you move, please remember you're the leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.) Fermaus's flake left.

"How can I not understand this....." he murmured as he watched the flake ride the wind.

"But Fermaus, you don't understand me at all."

He held tightly to the Dite hanging from his waist.



All members of the 17th platoon had lunch together after training.

"The time of training is about to end," Dalshena said, sipping tea. "Now it doesn't matter when the other city appears. If possible, I want that time to come sooner."

"Yes," Nina agreed.

"It's best to fight when everyone's ready and full of spirit. We might loosen up as time drags on."

"Uh, it wouldn't be strange to fall down from exhaustion if we did this everyday," Sharnid said. He had been running around, tallying the scores of his sniping team.

"You....." Dalshena turned around. Both she and Nina frowned.

"We don't know when the fight will start. Who knows, we might have been late in beginning our preparations."

"But the intercity match last year began after the end of platoon matches. As if the Electronic Fairies already came to a consensus."

"Speaking of which, the last intercity match happened around this time?"

The three people who had participated in the last intercity match moved their gazes to a far distance. They were probably recalling the tragic defeat that subsequently brought about Zuellni's current condition. Though they showed their intentions differently, Layfon could tell the three of them wanted to clear their shame. Layfon and Naruki were in their first years. Felli was in her second year. They had only heard of the last intercity match.

"We'll definitely win this time," Layfon said.

"Ah, yes," Nina smiled.

"I believe we can win easily because you're here," Sharnid said.

"How could you say such a thing. You're shameless," Dalshena reproached.

Everyone laughed. But the easy atmosphere broke here.

".....What's so funny about that?"

Cold words shattered the air. Felli put down the porcelain cup and met their gazes.

"Felli.....?"

"Please tell me what is so funny? What's so funny with relying on someone's strength? I don't understand."

She was different from usual. Her words were full of anger.

"Senpai, it isn't like that. We were just joking," Layfon said.

"You're right. We went overboard. Sorry," Nina apologized with her head lowered. But she seemed to have poured oil onto the heat of anger.



"....." Felli stood up and left.

After a short period of silence, Layfon stood up with haste and chased after her.

"Felli-senpai."

She didn't seem to want to stop.

"What's happened?" he caught up to her and walked alongside her. "They didn't mean it in a bad way. They found it funny so..... Senpai....."

"Fon Fon"

".....Don't you know already, Felli?" Layfon consciously checked his surroundings to see whether anyone had heard of his nickname. "Sharnid senpai said it because it's his personality. He didn't really mean it....."

"He can just say whatever he likes. We've spent a long time together. I know his personality. I don't care what he does, but....."

"But?"

"But that can't be helped. I was angry."

Angry over what? He could only look at her. Incomprehensible.

"Fon Fon, haven't you been thinking?"

"Eh?"

"About the Haikizoku."

Layfon confirmed his surroundings again at that name. The emergency training had ended and there weren't any other classes. The street was filled with students like him, who had just finished his lunch. There didn't seem to be anyone he had to worry about. And he didn't see any Mercenary Gang members either. He returned his gaze to Felli.

Felli was the only psychokinesist who sensed the Haikizoku in the ruined city. The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang had asked for her aid, knowing what she had seen. Perhaps she might search for the Haikizoku's location again because of that experience, so there was a high possibility of the Mercenary Gang monitoring her movement.

"You don't have to worry about them," Felli said, knowing what was on his mind.

"That person....." She avoided using the name. "Why make that face as if she doesn't care?"

She meant Nina. Nina didn't seem to care, even though the Haikizoku was inside her. Winning the intercity match had been Nina's goal all along, but that didn't excuse her attitude toward the Haikizoku.

Layfon thought so too. But Nina always used the intercity match as an excuse to evade him.

"That person doesn't understand how worried we are about her."

There was anxiety in Felli's voice. She had said during Nina's disappearance that she and Layfon were here, fighting, because of Nina's existence. Both Felli and Layfon possessed excellent abilities, but both were unwilling to use them. Layfon's reason was because of Grendan, and Felli's was because of her doubt in her path as a psychokinesist. However, both of them had been transferred to Military Arts, and they were now part of team 17. The Student President Karian was the source of that problem, yet Nina's intense will moved the two to keep on fighting. Nina's disappearance reminded Felli of this. That was why she got impatient with the Captain.

"I'm worried too," Layfon said. He couldn't quite find any comforting words to say, so he sided with her, nodding.

"But there's no need to take it out on others. It's better to go back and apologize," he added.

"No."

An immediate refusal.

The two of them parted at an intersection. Felli walked back home on her own.

(I did something stupid today.) Having calmed down, she thought she wasn't without reason at getting angry, but she found her actions regrettable. What was more annoying was that her way of showing her anger did nothing to convey the reason behind it. The same reason as Layfon's. The pain and worry that the two of them went through, fighting desperately, fainting due to over-exhaustion.....and Nina's words brushed

past that so lightly. That made it hard to stomach. Nina's attitude in the Training Complex made her really mad. A feeling of rejection.

(I'm so useless.)

Thinking back, she had met a number of situations where she failed to handle her emotions since formally entering the 17th platoon. A feeling that she knew she wanted to do something but she wasn't sure how to go about it. She was worried about Nina but Nina didn't react to her worry. That made Felli feel down. But there was also one more reason behind her impatience.

(Becoming so calm just because that person is back.....)

Layfon. The Layfon who was like an ant running on a hot wok during Nina's disappearance. He now seriously prepared for the intercity match, and he even helped train other students. He must be worried about Nina too, yet he failed to find a solution to solve the problem with the Haikizoku.

(He's calm, at ease.)

Just because Nina was here. And that kept the turmoil alive in Felli's heart.

She had to do something.....She walked into the lobby of the building.

The next day, Felli was missing from the raucous crowd of Military Arts students.

Chapter 3: Two paint scrolls

Leerin adjusted the binoculars to the highest power and finally got a good look at the crest on the flag. "That is Zuellni....."

Zuellni, the city where Layfon was. Realizing this sudden truth brought her a wave of happiness, but the next wave of tension pressed hard on her chest.

"Only one more day," Savaris murmured behind her.

"So the war will begin tomorrow?"

Leerin and Savaris were in Myath, and this city was also an Academy City like Zuellni. Cities only fought those that were classified as the same type of city. That rule might last forever. This meant an Academy city wouldn't fight any other city unless that city was in the same class that it was.

Myath had stopped its movement in its journey to meet Zuellni. Leerin had been complaining about that delay, but she was too surprised now to say anything. Zuellni was right there. Was this luck?

"I think so, but if Layfon participates as a Military Artist, then there's no way they can lose. Of course, that's if he's still the Layfon I knew."

What was Savaris trying to say? She looked at him. His smile still told her nothing.

"Is Layfon really strong?"

A slight movement of his eyebrow. Surprised at the question, he answered, "One cannot become a Heaven's Blade successor if he's not strong."

"Uh, that's true."

She knew already.

"I knew already, but I can't look at it like something natural. Whether it's Layfon being a Military Artist or Layfon becoming a Heaven's Blade successor, and the truth that the orphanage wouldn't have survived if not for him. I knew all that, but I can't accept it without reservation."

Perhaps she was spoiled. She liked watching Layfon train alone in the dojo, but she never wanted to connect him with the battlefield.

"There's no doubt as to Layfon's strength. The other Heaven's Blades and I all acknowledged him after watching his match for the Wolfstein title. Aaah, but I've only fought with him once," Savaris said, closing his eyes, as if he was trying to recall something. "That was a terrible fight. A filth monster in its 6th stage named Behemoth. I, Layfon and Lintence fought it. If we don't count the combination of Cauntia and Ruimei, that was a rare cooperative fight between Heaven's Blade successors."

He opened his eyes as if he was seeing that scene of that day. He began his narration. "Aaaah.....That fight was really.....really interesting."



The smell in the air seemed to change before the battle. The change was so tiny that it was hard to notice it. It was a pain that felt like water being poured into one's nose.

"Really?" the new Heaven's Blade successor replied to Savaris's question with a tone that didn't make him likeable at all.

Layfon Wolfstein Alseif.

He looked like a student who had just graduated from primary school, but he had already taken the Heaven's Blade title since one year ago. He also had lots of experience in fighting filth monsters alone. No emotion showed in his eyes. On the contrary, darkness seemed to rule them.

"Sensei, do you have such a feeling?" Layfon lifted his head to ask the other Heaven's Blade successor.

Lintence Savoleid Harden.

This Heaven's Blade successor always gave an expression of being in low spirits. He was patting the stubble on his chin as he watched somewhere far away.

"No. Rather than wasting time on such feelings, it's better to train ten thousand times."

"Thanks for your advice."

An attitude that was always the same. A reply that suited the notorious reputation of Lintence as someone who hated socializing. But for some reason, he had taught this young man his steel thread techniques. Why had he done that?

"Speaking of which....." Layfon looked around. "Is this really a good place?"

The three of them were standing on the outskirt of Grendan. Grendan's outskirts were much more spacious than those of other cities due to its frequent contact with filth monsters. This area was made for the fighting convenience of Military Artists. Currently, only three Heaven's Blades stood here, and that wasn't a meaningless action.

"Delbone.....That old woman said so. It can't be wrong."

Delbone Quantis Myura. The three of them gathered here because they listened to the prediction of the only psychokinesist among the Heaven's Blades.

"But she fainted again after saying it. She should just die and give up the Heaven's Blade title."

"Don't think that will happen before the person to replace her appears."

Delbone was already over 100 years old. She stayed most of her time lying on a hospital bed, but no one had yet exceeded her in the ability of psychokinesis, so she retained the Heaven's Blade title. As if predicting the future, her psychokinesis had discovered the invasion of an aged phase filth monster. She had also predicted that it would appear here today. That was why the three of them were guarding this place.

"Lintence, no reaction yet?"

"Not yet"

Lintence held a restored Dite. He wore a pair of leather gloves with white gold covering the fingertips. And stretching before those tips were millions of fine steel threads that spread to the outside of the city like antennas. The filth monster in Delbone's prediction had not yet appeared.

"But if Behemoth really appears here like Delbone had said, then we can be sure that it reaches a place in a blind spot of the steel threads."

"Ah, that's possible."

Behemoth, a name for the filth monster. No other cities had done this, and it was rare enough even in Grendan. Only a filth monster that had fulfilled a condition was given a name. An aged phase monster with fighting power that was unusually huge. Behemoth had already fought the Heaven's Blades, but it managed to escape.

"That was before I became a Heaven's Blade successor. And Delbone became a Heaven's Blade after that event. Behemoth must have some reason behind its actions," Lintence said.

Savaris looked at the scenery outside the city. A large number of huge filth monsters nests were currently located in Grendan's vicinity. Numerous filth monsters had left their nests for the city, and the ones to handle them were the Heaven's Blades and other Military Artists. But only Lintence and his two fellow Heaven's Blades stood in this spacious area at the outskirt of the city. The siren rang through the air. Normal citizens were now hurrying to the shelters. The rest of the Military Artists had gathered around the palace in case anything happened – in case Savaris, Lintence and Layfon lost the fight.

But that probably wouldn't happen.

"But no outside city gear was given for fights taking place outside the city. Her Majesty gave a bold order."

"We'll know once the fight begins."

"Ha."

"Millions of guesses cannot beat the truth. Here it comes," Lintence said suddenly without varying the tone of his voice.

First it was the mad shaking of the ground.

"Earthquake.....? No."

Next came the sound of metal, so shrill that it was about to pierce the eardrums. One of the multi-legs supporting Grendan was pulled back by something, causing an intense shaking of the city.

"Something....." Layfon said in a small voice.

And it was suddenly here. That something almost took over the entire field of vision, blocking out the sun. It was climbing up the city from the city's

edge. Its back was covered by numerous slabs of rock. A displeasing noise of something rubbing against something accompanied its entrance.

Savaris lifted his head and saw a part in white.

".....Either way, this is a giant," he said.

Yes, that gigantic thing did resemble a human. More precisely, it resembled a mud doll made by kids. The filth monster Behemoth stood on Grendan as if waiting to be served in a restaurant.

"My first time seeing something this massive," Layfon said with the sword lowered, his pupils staring at Behemoth as if they were sinking into darkness. His expression was neither unease nor fear. He was just observing the thing in front of him – Behemoth.

Something fluttered down from the filth monster. Soil. Wet and humid soil from the depth of the earth was stuck on the entire body of the filth monster. It had been moving below ground, a blind spot of Lintence's steel threads. As for the psychokinesist, she couldn't have predicted the movement under the ground without huge powers of concentration. Only Delbone could do it.

"Well, time to get rid of it?"

"True."

Savaris and Layfon nodded, and at that moment, they ran for Behemoth like wind. They naturally split without communication. One headed for the left. One headed for the right.

"Can you release your dirty hand?"

Savaris released his Kei as he headed for the hands that were about the same size as Grendan's multi-legs, clamping on the city's edge.

External Kei variation – Gourikiteppa Kouga.

External Kei variation – Sendan.

Savaris' palm faced Behemoth's right hand. A move of Kei that was released from the outside to the inside of the target and shattering the target at the same time. As expected, the front part of Behemoth broke into pieces as if it was bitten by a fierce beast. At the same time, Layfon cut apart Behemoth's left hand with his sword.

Savaris' move was intense and exciting, whereas Layfon's was quiet and calm. Losing balance, Behemoth fell and was trapped between a number of multi-legs.

(Aah? That was unexpected.....)

Both of them were surprised at how easy it was to defeat their target. The filth monster had once slipped through the hands of Heaven's Blades in the past, and it also had its own name. But it was so weak. Its muscles were weak.

"Fools, hurry and get away!" Lintence's voice sounded behind them.

The cut off hands changed, expanding in a shocking rate and exploded. Scale-like things scattered along with the explosion, and they were sharp. Leaping through the air did little to evade those scales because of the close distance between them and the projectiles. The two Heaven's Blade successors ended up sustaining some damage.

"I see. That's why we don't fight outside the city."

Lintence had landed somewhere above one of the multi-legs. He quickly checked himself. The injuries weren't deep but his clothes were in tatters. Blood seeped from torn skin. If they fought outside the city, the protective suit would definitely sustain damage. And when that happened, even Heaven's Blades could do nothing but wait for death from the invasion of pollutants.

"Her Majesty and the others are really mean. They should have told us about that already."

Lintence glanced at Layfon. It seemed he had sustained similar injuries. Meanwhile, parts of Behemoth were gathering at the place where the filth monster was attempting to stand up.

"That isn't regeneration. It's gathering its parts and combining them. Doesn't that make it an undying thing?"

Behemoth moved. It once again reached out for the city with its upper body. Savaris looked closer and saw its lower body was fused with the earth.

"Has that thing become the earth? That level of evolution is beyond common sense." He had the time to stand surprised and sigh because Lintence was here.

Lintence's steel threads cut away Behemoth's hands. A final shield stood between the city's outskirts and its outside. The second explosion came but the scales never reached a distance as far as before, and they became dust in the next instant. Lintence had weaved a net, controlling it with his Kei. The scales were cut by that net. He raised his right hand. His left hand controlled the invisible net, then what about his right hand? In there he held a weapon so fine that no one could see with his naked eyes.

Steel threads. That insignificant weapon had become powerful in Lintence's hands. His right hand moved, weaving the steel threads into a shape above him. Even a Heaven's Blade's power of vision could not discern the steel threads, but they now showed themselves through the Kei running in them.

A long cone.

"Break into thousand pieces," he said as the cone hammered into Behemoth's chest.

Sougenkyouku - Hanemushi.

The huge cone entered Behemoth's body in waves of successive explosions. The cone underwent changes inside the body. The steel threads gathered together were now unraveling in a shocking rate, damaging the filth monster's body and shredding it into pieces.

"He really did show something else in a crisis....." Savaris said, crouching down to avoid the scales.

The upper half of the filth monster had been destroyed by Lintence. Would it revive again? Or.....Savaris floated on the air with all his might, observing. But there were no signs of stopping.

"Tsk."

Something huge was nearing him at high speed. Something that looked like an antenna with numerous mouths, its teeth grinding against each other. It must have escaped Lintence's attack. Savaris kicked it away and used the momentum of the kick to return to the ground. What about Layfon.....

He saw Layfon cut open the antenna in the air. A closer look. What wonderful skill in riding the air. Every time, Layfon managed to swing his sword and obtain balance, ready for the next move. He was fighting with

room to spare in a stage that was disadvantageous for him. He also did well handling the explosions of the scales.

"I can't lose to him."

The density of Kei rose exponentially in Savaris. At the same time, changes came about in the Kei gathered in his wrists. A silvery white flame burst out from his wrists.

External Kei Karen Kei – Jaryu.

Rooted on the spot, he lashed out with his fists in lightning speed. Strange was that the fists did not produce any loud noise. His fists were quiet as of training. However, those attacks did reach Behemoth. Silvery white explosions crashed one after another on the damaged upper body where countless antennas stuck out. The directions of Savaris's fists were anywhere but Behemoth, yet Behemoth's body was sustaining heavy damages. The attacks of silvery white flame cleared out the antennas, and those fallen antennas then exploded. Savaris could see Layfon's figure caught in the explosions.



"....."

Layfon's determined expression was unchanged. His wordless eyes seemed to have seen through his opponent's moves. His posture showed that he was readying for his next move.

Heaven's Blade Technique – Karou.

One flash and Layfon had executed numerous cutting paths, destroying all scales before him.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

Layfon landed and asked without focusing on him.

Savaris laughed.

"If you died at that level, wouldn't that rather be a relief?" He could feel the excitement inside him. How interesting. All three Heaven's Blades were each using their ultimate moves, yet the filth monster still lived. How many such filth monsters were there in this world? So interesting. So interesting that he couldn't control himself. This was more interesting than anything else.

The sound of stirring coming from outside the city never stopped. The Heaven's Blades' attacks appeared to be only scratches on this monster.

"Looks like we have to keep going," Savaris began using his Kei.



"I did enjoy myself," Savaris said, sipping tea after his meal as he reminisced.

The current location was the canteen. The announcement had just conveyed the discovery of Zuellni, and a wave of festive atmosphere from the people gathered in the canteen spread through the air.

Although this would be a fight to decide the winner of the Military Arts Competition, a fight between Academy Cities would not shed blood. In other words, this was like a festive activity on a large scale. The impending fight brought excitement to the audience, spreading out naturally from the crowd.

Leerin listened to Savaris talk about the past as she ate. She had never seen Layfon fight a filth monster. As an average person, she always headed for the shelter when an emergency arose. She'd probably never get to see a real battle. Hence, Savaris's description of Layfon was to her something refreshing and new, as if she was hearing about someone she didn't know. Either way, she had never seen that side of Layfon. And her heart acknowledged this fact, especially after Layfon's match with Gahard. Loneliness stuffed her chest. The Layfon who lived with her as a kid, whom she shared pain and happiness with, but suffered everything in a place she didn't know, suffering it without saying a word to anyone.

The man sitting behind Leerin spoke, "Who will win?"

"This side. Myath recently beat up some filth monsters. I heard Zuellni has a record of defeats. The strengths of Military Artists over there are low."

"Ah, that might not be it though. What if a very promising newcomer appears over there? It is an Academy City. They receive new students every year."

"Ha ha, who'd let a promising Military Artist leave a city so easily?"

"Wanna bet?"

Leerin looked behind her. They might be travelers who spent a long time traveling. They probably survived by buying and selling information. Savaris was also listening in. A promising newcomer in Zuellni. Of course, no newcomer was more promising than Layfon. But instead of talking about Layfon, he mentioned another person.

"It seems my brother fails to change the battle's fate. How sad."

Savaris's younger brother was in Zuellni. He had said that before in the roaming bus. Gorneo. If he was in his 5th year now, that meant he must have participated in the previous intercity match.

"Do you have a bad relationship with your brother?"

If one were to understand Savaris' words on the surface, then the Heaven's Blade really held little feelings for his brother.

"Not really. But my brother fears me. He probably feels pressure just by standing in my shadow."

A younger brother who had an older, elite brother. Leerin probably couldn't understand that feeling. She had no siblings. She couldn't comprehend Gorneo's feelings. Gorneo had to choose the same path as his brother.

"It might be better if he had no ability at all. Maybe it's because we're in the same family. He's not bad, but it's his bad luck to be born after me. But that's not a bad feeling."

A chill went down Leerin's spine at his last words.

"But he's your younger brother."

"Yes, so what?" he didn't seem to care about her retort. "Heaven's Blades only seek power. If he was preventing me from reaching that goal, I'd kick him out of the Luckens family even though he's my brother." The smile on his face became hard to discern. He had spoken his true feelings.

Leerin was an orphan. She didn't have anyone blood-related who would love her unconditionally. One could say from another angle that because one didn't have someone blood-related, that was what made one an orphan. So she understood better than anyone how precious it was to have a family.

"Aah, you're wrong if you think I'm the only one who thinks like that. Actually, most Heaven's Blades think the same."

"Eh?"

"Heaven's Blades are the most powerful Military Artists in Grendan, and they also make the most unusual organization. They chase after power with any means they can find. Layfon is the only exception."

Only Layfon was different. That pleased Leerin. Savaris' tone seemed to exclude Layfon from the unusual organization.

"Excuse me, but if Layfon had wholeheartedly sought power, Gahard wouldn't have been able to grasp hold of his weakness, and he wouldn't have been exiled."

Leerin's comfort disappeared.

"Layfon's motivation to become strong is probably more complicated than us 'normal' Heaven's Blades' motivations. Of course, that reason might explain why he was so powerful in the past. But because of it....."

Leerin didn't know how to react to what he said next.

"He's now lost his reason to fight. He might have become quite weak. That's what I think." Savaris' thoughts turned back to the past, submerging himself in the excitement of past battles.

Leerin remained silent, holding her breath. Had Layfon really become weak? It'd be good if he wasn't like that. Yes, she thought from deep down that it'd be good if Layfon stood before Savaris again.



Three days and three nights. They kept on fighting Behemoth. Three days. One move came after another to destroy the filth monster. Power kept surging. Moves were improved. Kei was weaved again and again.

"About time. I've had enough."

Dry impatience shot through Layfon's voice. That wasn't because he was tired. Heaven's Blades would not collapse from a mere three days fight as they fought with internal Kei. However, psychologically, he was reaching his limit. He had fought countless times with countless numbers of enemies. He had fought much longer than three days. But usually he could see the results of his attacks in the forms of corpses. But Behemoth continued to recombine and recover. No result could be seen, and that had cracked through Layfon's mind. Besides, Behemoth varied its strategies as the fight progressed. It wasn't increasing its strength in self-explosions. It laid traps to cancel the enemy attacks. Every attack hid behind it a plan. Instead of weakening, it had become stronger. Layfon was probably thinking of how to quickly end the fight.

(He's reaching his limit?)

It was enough already that he had this level of fighting strength at his age, but his mental toughness had yet to match the level of his strength. This was a good time for him to flee the battle, but Savaris wouldn't know whether that was a good choice for him.

(Not good, if he dies now.)

Actually, he cared naught for Layfon's death. What he cared about was that he, falling under his own psychological trap, might interfere with the battle.

(And it's been so long since I had such enjoyment.)

Unlike Layfon, Savaris exulted in high tension. And that tension didn't weaken through time. Affected by this feeling, he felt satisfaction every time he used Kei and executed a move, as if he was discovering new things in this battle. The Behemoth standing before him told him that he could turn stronger so he must not allow interference in this fight.

(Let him retreat.)

Just when Savaris made his decision...

"What? Can't take it already?" Lintence called to Layfon.

"No way."

Lintence nodded. "Good. You ought to know this situation is nothing. You've been fighting filth monsters till now, and you might keep living life like this forever after becoming a Heaven's Blade successor. One mistake can send you down to the god of death. And impatience is always what leads to tragedy. I think you have experienced that already."

A rumor had it that Layfon had tried out a move of the steel threads on his own and had sustained almost fatal injuries.

".....Yes."

"Then you know what you need the most now?"

"Endure and keep on fighting."

"Since you understand, then keep at it. If you keep on being so shameful, I'll cut you up."

"Yes."

The impatience in Layfon's eyes gradually disappeared, and he turned silent again.

(Eh.....?)

That was unexpected for Savaris. It was already rare for a Heaven's Blade to teach another, and that someone was none other than Lintence, the notoriously anti-social person.

Lintence continued, "Of course, I hate this kind of fight too. It's about time to think of a way to end it. 259,200 seconds. We've spent too much time appeasing this guy's hunger."

"But what do we do?"

The fight continued throughout the conversation. Behemoth's position hadn't changed much. He was still outside the city. The inside area of the outskirt had become a mess after the three Heaven's Blades' attacks and the exploding scales. Deep furrows tore the ground, and nearby buildings and facilities had been destroyed. A three day, three night fight, and the three Heaven's Blades had still to suppress the filth monster's attacks. Savaris thought the same as others, but he just didn't seem dissatisfied.....

"Take a good look," Lintence said, and everyone turned to study Behemoth.

It was still aiming for the city, climbing up its surface and releasing all antennas for that purpose. Savaris and the other two were attacking those antennas. However, nothing much had changed.

"Deceived by its large size? Or because we were too focused on it and missed it? In truth, that guy has become small."

"Eh?" Layfon made a surprised noise.

Savaris didn't entirely agree with that point.

"Meaning it can't revive 100%. One possibility is because of its numerous self-destructs. If that isn't the case, the only possibility is because we've kept releasing Kei. The accumulated effects of each attack are decimating it."

"If that's the case, does that mean we still have to drag out the fight?" Savaris said, blocking the antennas reaching at him from all sides.

"Power isn't the only factor in preventing this guy from reviving. We have to think of whether those pieces of it, scattered around, move on their own. Our attacks are powerful, but if we look at Behemoth as a combined form, then we can't destroy its entire being."

"You mean....." Savaris didn't reply, but he got an idea of what Lintence was saying.

"Behemoth isn't a single life. It's multiple lives, made of many small cells?"

Lintence nodded.

So that wasn't self-explosion. It scattered itself for the main body to reform and move. It was a self-defense mechanism. Compared to that, enemy attacks were just side-effects of its main objective.

"Not one thread, but one face. Not one part but the entire. We have to kill all its cells in a short time through some super-heavy pressure attack."

Lintence's declaration made the other two Heaven's Blades speechless.

"Use your most powerful Kei in the next attack. I'll take the first attack, then you two go at it at the same time.....Don't tell me you need more than 10 seconds to prepare?"

A direct provocation that made Savaris' heart leap.

"Sure, let's do it."

"I get it, Sensei."

The two of them nodded at the same time.

"I probably don't need 10 seconds. You?"

"Anytime. As you like."

Layfon's reply was indifferent, but he had to also view this with anticipation. A wish to push himself to his own limit. Releasing Kei that far exceeded anybody's, executing a move that was more incredible than anyone else's. This was a competition between the three Heaven's Blade successors.

"Then, I'll start," Lintence said as he counter-attacked, destroying the antennas invading the outskirts with lightning-fast speed as if he intended to destroy the outskirts area too. Huge explosions blew in successive waves, enveloping Savaris and Layfon. A close study showed the two of them had already left the zone of explosions to stand on the very outer edge of the city – the last of Lintence's defense. In here, not even debris could get through.

Lintence had been working on the defense line till now, but he was gathering Kei and had no strength left for anything else.

"Hurry and....."

"Leave!"

The two of them executed their Kei techniques as they roared.

External Kei variation – Fuuretsukei.

External Kei variation – Kakei.

Wind spurted from the tip of Savaris' foot in his kick and from the blade of Layfon's sword as he swung down. They destroyed the cells that were scattered from the explosions. The air on the outside suddenly calmed. Lintence's preparation was done. An immense amount of Kei suffused the steel threads above them. The light radiating off of the steel threads covered the sky. Behemoth, trying to revive its antenna and the cells that had been turned to dust, were all sealed into that huge net of Kei in one split second.

"Let me send you to the other shore."

Sougenkyouku - Houraku. White light flooded the surroundings. The Kei in the steel threads became Shou Kei. Huge waves of Kei crashed from the net to the inside. The side effects of those huge impacts were sealed inside the net. Nothing leaked out of the net except the light. At the same time, Lintence ran Kei through the steel threads to sustain the Kei lost from the net. This perfect barrier was sealing the pressure inside it, gradually breaking down Behemoth.

Of course, it wasn't impossible to hear the filth monster's tragic moans from outside the barrier. One could probably see this huge block of light from the other side of the city. However, this powerful Kei technique wouldn't last long. Ten seconds. Lintence had used that number as a provocation, but that was also his limit. His level of Kei was reduced to his lowest level after 10 seconds, and the strength of the steel threads wavered. The block of light cracked. Numerous steel threads floated in the air, unraveling, returning to their master. Behemoth's howl didn't even sound like a voice. The sparkling particles around it were the remains that had lost their ability to revive. Even Savaris could see how small Behemoth had become. He and Layfon had already jumped into the air for this moment, closing fast on Behemoth.

Savaris was the first to make his move. No, he was already making it when he leaped. Internal Kei variation, a Luckens secret ability, Thousand Man Rush. The number of Savaris heading for Behemoth increased from one to two, to four, eight, sixteen, thirty two, sixty four, a hundred twenty eight.....The number exploded until it far exceeded one thousand. And that all happened within a few seconds.

Lintence's steel threads had all loosened, releasing Behemoth's remains from the light. A thousand Savaris had planned their locations and started attacking the filth monster's right hand side.

Considering that he was in the air, the strength needed to dispel the side-effects from executing the move, and stopping himself in the air, so he only had 5 seconds left to fight.....Savaris laughed. An honest and cruel laugh caused by elation. This was his first time reaching this level. Would they finish Behemoth, or.....Yet Lintence had managed to seal off this massive Behemoth's movements while releasing such terrible crashes of Kei at the same time.

How many Heaven's Blade successors possessed this secret technique?

"Ok, I'll show you," one thousand Savaris said.

One must use a secret technique against a secret technique. External Kei variation, Luckens Secret Technique – Roar Kei. Waves powerful enough to eradicate cell particles shot out of one thousand Savaris' mouths.

Layfon was still in the air. The sword in his hand was releasing a frightful light. An onlooker wouldn't be able to tell whether it really was a sword or not.

Not one thread, but one face. Lintence's strategy wasn't an easy task for Layfon who used a sword. But Layfon wouldn't say it was an unreasonable request. Lintence had shown him that he could do it – executing a heavy pressure attack in a short period of time, overwhelming and annihilating the target with an immense amount of Kei. Besides, Savaris was also making an incredible move while increasing his numbers with a Thousand Man Rush. Layfon had no other choice.

"I can only do this."

He raised his sword and swung down.

Shou Kei.

It didn't involve any technique. It was just a move to simultaneously release the flow of immense Kei and its destructive power sealed into the Heaven's Blade. A colossal pillar of light swung down, bathing the left half of Behemoth in a storm of Kei.

Savaris had succeeded in executing the two Luckens moves that no other person had managed to use. And Layfon, possessing a shockingly immense amount of Kei, had summoned a storm of Kei with horrible destructive power. These two people had already exceeded the limit that a Military Artist of their time could imagine. The filth monster could not counterattack or move under these two assaults.

Half of Behemoth's body became a mountain of sand. As if blown by a wind, the mountain collapsed.

The other half seemed to be bitten by a gigantic, insane beast, bitten into pieces. Behemoth began to collapse completely under two destructive forces.

"Aaaaaaaaaagh!" "Aaaaaaaaaagh!"

The limit was near. Same as with Lintence, the time limit was about 10 seconds. These types of moves that exhausted lots of Kei needed its wielder to continuously release that amount of Kei for the move to work. As expected, the release of Kei gradually slowed.

"Did we.....get it?"

Savaris had turned back into only one Savaris. He fell from the sky, exhausted, trying to confirm the result.

Numerous gray particles danced in the air. The remains of Behemoth showed no signs of joining. Did that mean it was defeated? Can't be sure yet. As Lintence had said, Behemoth was a body cohabited by multiple lives. It was difficult to confirm the death of each cell but if not all of them were destroyed.....

"Huh!" Savaris's gaze was pulled to somewhere.

One of the gray particles was falling and twisting strangely. It was alive. The size of it was about the same as a human. Savaris wanted to rush over and destroy it, but affected by the impacts of using two strong moves simultaneously, he couldn't even lift his finger. The filth monster didn't seem to want to fight, but it'd return to attack Grendan if they let it escape

now. Savaris got a good fight today in which he could reach his limit, bringing him a dose of fulfillment. However, that sense of fulfillment suffered from the thought of being unable to eliminate the filth monster.

He called up the internal Kei in him, doing all he could to dispel his tiredness. But this was only enough to prevent him from falling dead. He didn't know whether it was enough for him to catch up with Behemoth. Urged by impatience, he increased his internal Kei flow. Just a bit more, just a bit more.....He confirmed his level of recovery as the one second passed. Exhaustion began to fade. The numb Kei path began to awaken.

Three seconds. He had taken that much time from noticing Behemoth's sign of life to recovering enough to move.

"Good!" he readied his pose, pouring Kei into his running feet to increase his speed, at the same time.....

Doh!

A shadow appeared in Savaris's line of sight, accompanied by a rumble of explosion. A gaze from silent pupils pierced through the fleeing Behemoth. Layfon and his silvery white pillar of light were here.

Savaris was about to touch ground, and that was the moment when Layfon swung his sword without hesitation. The explosion made a large pit in the ground. The wind from that impact blew the gray particles into chaos. Savaris lay on the ground.

Layfon stood in a cloud of gray particles that spread out in the savage gale. Behemoth's remaining body had been split into halves and pounded into pieces by the Shou Kei.

(Why?)

Savaris was speechless. Layfon was the first to recover. Just one second. Perhaps it was a difference of less than a second. But he thought that only half a second would be enough to decide the victor if he were to cross blades with Layfon.

(How.)

A young and new Heaven's Blade successor. The youngest Heaven's Blade successor on record who held no awareness of himself. Layfon was quicker by half a second. What feeling did it bring to him? Anger? Jealousy? No.

"As I said, this city is the best."

Fascination. Intoxication.

"I'll never get tired of it," Savaris murmured.



Her chest tightened as she listened to the story, but she quickly recovered. The Layfon that Savaris had described might not equal to the current Layfon. That was Layfon's past, but fortunately, it might not become Leerin's reason for worry. True. He might have become weaker than when he was still a Heaven's Blade successor. That might be true, but, what could she say?

That was Leerin's reply. To her, Layfon's value wasn't measured by how powerful he was as a Military Artist. She didn't care how powerful or weak he had become. She was just worried whether he was suffering from something. What she needed was not guesses based on his past, but preparation for the future based on his current condition. That was why she had come to Myath to bridge the past and future. Tomorrow, Myath would make contact with Zuellni. She had to move over to that city.

(Anyway, it's better to meet than to make guesses on my own.)

She had enough troubles in Grendan. And she came here because she had made up her mind. Staying at one place was the same as being stagnant. Thinking of this, she suddenly realized she was never good at making sense of big things. Actually, she didn't have the time to consider such a big thing, but the sudden appearance of Zuellni had given her a shock.

"Savaris," she said, calling back the daydreaming Heaven's Blade.

"What?" he said, reaching out for the tea. He drained the cup of tea that had gone cold, his eyes showing he wanted one more cup. Leerin stood up and poured him new tea.

"Ah, thanks. Uh, what is it?"

"I was thinking, aren't we going to move to Zuellni?"

"Ah, oh no," he sighed without feelings.

Leerin lowered her head.

"Sorry, it's just that my way of thinking won't be as appropriate."

"You mean normal travel won't work?" she asked.

"Yeah. Though I don't have much experience in intercity fights, but think about it. Normal passage should recover after the winner's decided. Well, Leerin, you've been in the shelter every time a fight happened. It's normal not to know what happens outside."

An unexpected difficulty had arisen.

"What should we do?"

Roaming buses wouldn't move for now. Did that mean they had to walk over to Zuellni? That wasn't something a normal person could do. Even without much knowledge in fights, Leerin knew the place where the two cities met would become the most intense arena. Then was she to wait till the fight was finished to ride the next roaming bus? No roaming buses were coming near because of the impending intercity match. A roaming bus might head over a few days after everything had settled. But.....

(I don't want to wait anymore.)

She could see Zuellni from here. She already knew she was so near the place she wanted to be in. How could she wait any longer?

"Well, don't have to worry so much," Savaris said, looking quite happy.

Leerin glared at him. If this atmosphere continued and he said something wrong, she might just get angry.

"Ah – Have you forgotten? I'm also a Military Artist."

She noticed what he hadn't said from his attitude.

"You mean....."

The unpleasant memory surfaced.

"I can send you to Zuellni without being discovered," he guaranteed with a smile. He blew at the tea to cool it down. "Please prepare to leave."

Leerin went back to her room to pack. It didn't take long, as she hadn't planned to stay here long in the first place. She had washed the dirty clothes she wore in the roaming bus and had left the ones she needed for the next day, putting everything back into her luggage.

(Tomorrow.....Can I see Layfon?)

That made today feel so long. She couldn't sit and stand. She couldn't calm herself. If she were in Grendan, she'd do chores.

"Yes."

She walked out into the corridor and took out the cleaning equipment. In theory, Myath's students were responsible for cleaning the facilities, but one couldn't expect a high level of service in an Academy City where its habitants' main purpose was to study. For example, meals were handed out in buffet style, and rooms weren't cleaned everyday. Instead, cleaning equipment was stored away for travelers to use. Leerin had cleaned her own room several times too because she thought the students didn't do a thorough enough job.

"I might not be here tomorrow, might as well do some good cleaning."

Time would fly if she were to aim to clean every single speck of dust. At the end of the day, she'd be so exhausted that she could get a good sleep.

(Speaking of which.....)

She thought of something while holding the handle of the broomstick.

(Could that event have happened during that time?)

She recalled what Savaris had said in the canteen, and something else surfaced in her mind through Savaris' story.

(Three days. That was about it.)

A fight that lasted for three days. Leerin and the young siblings had left the shelter to return to the orphanage. She had then taken the shopping list and left the orphanage.



She found Layfon standing on a street corner.

"Ah, Layfon."

"Leerin."

She ran to him with small steps. "Welcome home," she said, feeling at ease at seeing him safe.Huh. Why was he staring at her with widened eyes?

"What is it?"

"Ah, no, nothing," he shook his head in a fluster. The shocked expression on his face slowly faded.

"I'm back."

"Yeah, welcome back," she smiled. She was happy to see he had safely returned.

"Going to buy dinner?"

"Yeah, didn't have time to buy anything before heading for the shelter, so the fridge is empty. Layfon, what do you want to eat?"

"What did everyone say?"

The children at the orphanage had endured at the shelter by eating preserved food, so Leerin had gotten many suggestions when she said she was to go shopping. But today was special.

"Because you worked hard today, didn't you, Layfon? Let me reward you a bit."

"Um, how about adding burger meat to stew? I think that's good."

That wasn't just because he found it tasty. That dish was popular among the other kids too. It was one of the suggestions Leerin had received too.

He accompanied her naturally to the shops. They walked slowly, touching shoulders.

"Layfon, you have a sweet tooth."

"Not really. That was just really tasty."

"OK, but I won't make any snacks today. It'll be bad if we got rotten teeth, and we won't have space for dinner if we have sweets."

"I know."

He took her basket with a bitter smile.

No one would have doubted that Layfon had hoped to see her.

Chapter 4: The war begins

Karian Loss, the Student President, received the report of a city nearing Zuellni the moment he entered the Student President's office. Uneasiness filled him, as he hadn't seen his sister in the morning and she didn't seem to have returned home either. A bad feeling came to him.

"Um, that child is now a young woman." He said something that didn't match his age, trying to cover up the uneasiness in him. His thoughts turned to something else once he heard the report. He had to call in Vance and start planning and starting up the city's defense system. He also had to confirm the formations of the Military Arts students and check the preparations for the rest of the students to enter the shelters.

Actually, he'd have gone to check his sister's whereabouts or make an emergency call for the City Police or the 17th platoon if not for all those things he had to do. But he had no time for other things now.

The conclusion had come one hour after the report that the other city was named Myath.

"You heard of it?" Dalshena cocked her head, speaking in a voice that all the 17th platoon members could hear.

A rule had been set long ago that all platoon members were to gather when a city was discovered. Although emergency training gave room for relaxation, the training did have its effects. After considering everything, the 17th platoon had decided to wait in the room in the Training Complex.

"Ah~ Haven't heard of it," Sharnid said, also cocking his head. "There're so many Academy Cities. How can I remember them all? Of course, it's natural for a city's reputation to spread if it has a good record. But if we haven't heard of it, then its strength probably isn't much."

"That sounds logical," Harley nodded.

Harley had taken out a different machine during the final check for the Dites. He had put the Dites through that machine, displaying a list of data on the screen.

"These are the war records from the Academy City Alliance. It appears Myath's previous record was 1 win and 1 loss. It hadn't had many fights, and the fights were pretty peaceful. Not much to talk about," Sharnid said.

"But either way," Nina said, sweeping her gaze to him, "They're stronger than us."

Sharnid shut his mouth from making another joke, and smiled.

"No.....We're underestimating them if we think of what happens after we win. The war hasn't even started yet." Nina's looked at the members gathered in the room. Felli was missing.

"Is she still angry about yesterday?"

"Probably."

Nina looked obviously down at that.

"I didn't consider everything, and I made her angry. And we're in such a crisis....."

"What're you saying? She was the one who couldn't hold it in. No matter how good she is at psychokinesis, it's useless if she can't use it when the time calls for it." Dalshena said, holding her fists.

"Um, uh....." Looking at them, Sharnid suddenly seemed to remember something and he spoke to Layfon in a small voice. "Don't you think the females in our team like to get spoiled?"

"Eh?"

Layfon couldn't quite turn his head around at the sudden change of topic.

"No matter how you think of it, life is short, and youth passes by like the blink of an eye. That's why actors try their best to paint the beauty of youth. And the audience is either happy or sad about that. But it seems the females in our team don't get that point. Uh, it wasn't easy to be born as beautiful ladies, but they don't know it and they're wasting their time."

"Ha....."

Layfon had some sort of understanding of Sharnid's explanation, but since he didn't have the ability to seriously think about that kind of question, he didn't know what to say.

".....Do you mean me as well?" Naruki said.

"Ah, your sickness is light compared to them. But you're stiff. You don't have to worry becoming like them if you get early treatment."

".....I'll be troubled if I become soft like senpai. Isn't it important to be serious at a time when it needs to be serious? Senpai, you would be very handsome if you could be stronger."

"Oh, you did well," Sharnid looked pleased at Naruki's unexpected counterattack.

"What? what? What're you saying?" Harley said.



"Stuff that has got nothing to do with you, mad scientist."

"Wah, that's mean."

"I think you still have hope if you try harder."

"Ah, speaking of which, Urgh, I want a girlfriend."

"If you've got that thought, then work hard for it, my junior," Sharnid said like an older brother, and he suddenly turned his head around to Layfon. "Well, either way, you're all better than this naturally clumsy terminal phase patient."

".....What was that?" He had never heard of that term, but both Harley and Naruki nodded in understanding.

"Meaning's in the words. You don't understand, never mind. Speaking of which, can you really afford to relax at this time?"

"Eh?"

"Mediate between the two of them. That isn't my job. It's time for you to enter the stage."

"Ah, ok."

It looked like they wanted him to stop the two of them. Layfon stood up and prepared to search for Felli.

"Ah, Layfon, I've finished checking your Dites. You can take them with you," Harley said and handed him two Dites.

Two Dites?

"Senpai?"

The Sapphire Dite and the Shim Adamantium Dite.

"Although the Adamantium Dite is supposed to be used against filth monsters, it won't be of much use here. I think it's better if you have this instead."

"But you didn't change the setting? Then I can't use it."

The restored form was in the form of a Katana. Kirik had quickly discovered from the damages on the Dite that Layfon was used to wielding a Katana. But Layfon had decided not to use a Katana again. He must not

use the Psyharden technique because he had tainted his adopted father's name. Layfon couldn't help using the weapon in the fight against the 10th platoon, but he wouldn't use the Katana again unless it was under special circumstances.

"Uh, I think you think too much. You'll just be taking it with you," Harley took out the special-made weapon harness.

"But I'm sure I won't use it."

"Whether you use it or not is your business. Anyway, you should keep it since it's a Dite made for you," Harley shrugged. "That was what Kirik said."

Though he didn't want to, Layfon took both Dites, told Nina he was leaving, then left.

He headed straight for Felli's dormitory. He couldn't think of anywhere else she would be in. Definitely not in the dormitory of the 2nd year. Besides, she'd appear to be spoiled and would attract attention if she went to school. Being spoiled was all right, but attracting attention wasn't so good. Anyway, he just needed to head for the building for now. Since it was faster to use his two feet than to take the tram, Layfon jumped with Kei. It wouldn't be good if normal students saw him, but he had to hurry.

He quickly came to the front of the building.

"Um," he entered the lobby. While hesitating which doorbell to ring, an unexpected voice sounded behind him.

He knew who this person was. No need to turn around, but he had to, just in case he had to react. As he thought, it really was Haia. Layfon frowned, looking at the person he didn't want to meet.

"Why are you here?"

"I really admire your change of attitude, sort of like a double personality."

Haia was leaning on the wall of the lobby. When would he use Shou Kei? Why was he here? A bad feeling hovered in Layfon's mind, but his face showed nothing.

"Why are you here?" he asked again. The weapon harness was close to his hand, but Haia still had his arms crossed. In this case, Layfon would be the first to pull out his Dite.

"Look at this," Haia moved from his position and tossed over something to him. Layfon caught it and looked down.

"....." His gaze turned horrible.

A badge of the 17th platoon.

"I have Felli Loss."

"What a tasteless joke, do you not want to live?" The feeling had left Layfon's eyes. That was his habit, to gradually eradicate all feelings that were unnecessary in a fight. He now stared at Haia with an emotionless gaze.

"I know you have a lot to do, but this isn't the time," Haia crossed his arms, avoiding his murderous intent. "We'll have a one on one duel, but the time is tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

The day of the intercity match. Why that time? To make him unable to participate in the match?

"So Myath hired you without us knowing. You're good at doing business."

"Learn something.....That was what I wanted to say, but a shame. That has nothing to do with this. Teaching Military Artists and intercity matches have nothing to do with us anymore. In fact, we haven't had any contact with Myath."

"Then....."

"Stop getting involved in the little details. They don't mean a thing."

What was Haia thinking? Kidnapping Felli and challenging him. Both Haia and Layfon succeeded in the skills of Psyharden. Haia's master was Derek's senpai in the same Military Arts school. That was why Haia seemed to hold jealousy against Layfon. Layfon had heard of it from Fermaus.

"I just want to duel with you. Go back and make your preparations. Of course, be prepared that you can't run away. The environment might be advantageous for me. That's all I want to say."

"....."

"One more thing. Don't make a move today. You don't know how to do tricks to affect the outcome of the duel, do you?" Haia said and walked outside. "I'll let you know the location later.....Oh, that's right."

He stopped and turned around to point at Layfon's Dite.

"You're to use that Dite."

Layfon looked at the direction of Haia's finger – the Shim Adamantium Dite.

".....What're you thinking?"

Was he attacking him psychologically? But Haia had made a similar request in their previous fight.

"Since I've abandoned my way of thinking, as the side being blackmailed, shouldn't you also do something?" He said, waved and left.

Layfon returned to the Training Complex and reported the incident to Nina.

"How dare he....." Nina was first quiet, then she balled her hands into fists and her body shook.

"Has he damaged his brain?" she said in anger, the stirring of Kei echoing strongly in the room. The sensitivity of the Kei vein to the changes in a person's emotions had proven Nina's growth as a Military Artist, and her amount of Kei was also very large. Even Layfon mistook that as the Haikizoku awakening.

"Is the Haikizoku his aim?" Naruki asked.

Everyone's gaze turned to him.

"Not entirely sure," he said and shook his head, regaining his calm.

"Haia didn't say. He just wanted a duel with me."

"Unbelievable," Dalshena said. "He uses any means to reach his goal. How can you believe him just by what he says?"

The aim of Haia's organization was to capture the Haikizoku. Till now, the one that had been hurt the most was the 10th platoon.

"Should we contact the City Police?" Naruki said.

Nina shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, Naruki. In truth, the City Police isn't enough for the Mercenary Gang.....I see....." she seemed to understand

something. "I know why they're doing this. The Mercenary Gang hasn't allied itself with Myath. The possibility of that happening is low."

"Why?" Dalshena asked.

"They couldn't have predicted Myath would fight Zuellni even if they did teach Myath's Military Artists in the past. If that leaked out, Myath will get in trouble. So Myath probably wouldn't answer even if the Mercenary Gang suggested cooperating with them. Kidnapping Felli at this time is to take advantage of our current situation. If we fight the Mercenary Gang, that'd affect the intercity match. We can't do much without all our fighting power in this crisis."

"Meaning we have to listen to their request," Naruki said.

"But that isn't a bad strategy," Sharnid said.

"This isn't the time to admire them!" Dalshena howled at him.

"So what so we do? Accede to their request and let Layfon handle them himself?"

"That's all we can do..... but, we have to report this to the Student President, since this will affect his planning. Besides, he's Felli's brother and is also her only blood relative. We can't hide this from him."

"So how should we tell him?" Layfon asked slowly. Nobody could give him an answer.

Karian Loss transferred Layfon to Military Arts for this day, but now Layfon couldn't participate in the intercity match. What would the Student President say? That his sister was kidnapped because Haia wanted to duel with Layfon? But Layfon had said he'd prioritize Felli's rescue even if the Student President were to make him return all the school fees that he had waived.

"He really can do things," Karian said, leaning on the sofa. He had been called out of the meeting and told of Felli's situation. He was now in a room beside the meeting room to talk with Nina and Layfon.

"So what next?" Nina asked stiffly, waiting for his answer.....Her face showed she was prepared for anything.

"Uh....." He took up the phone and called Vance over.

"What?" Vance said, entering the room with confusion, but he seemed to have understood something after looking at Nina and Layfon.

"Got trouble?"

"We have to make changes to the strategy we made before," Karian said and explained the situation to Vance.

"Damn, who'd have thought they'd do this."

"Well, it's useless to argue this with them. Though they've helped us a lot recently, in the end, the result is unfortunate. Anyway, money and contracts are only so so. We can't help things by reproaching them, and we don't have the time for that. We'll stick to the original plan but make some adjustments to it. Please."

"Ah, only Gorneo and Shante can work on their own in that case. But the strength of that team relies on Gorneo's commands. Besides, I actually wanted him to command the students on a larger scale....."

"We couldn't have predicted this situation. We just need one chief commander. I'm already in my 5th year so this is my last Military Arts Competition. This isn't the time to consider the growth of others."

"True, but what about psychokinesis?"

"Ah....."

"Well....." Nina cut them off in a careful manner. "Can we hear of this?"

Vance turned to her and gave her the explanation. "That was the plan I planned to announce after lunch, but I'll tell you now. Actually, team 17's original mission wasn't to lead the usual Military Arts students, but to infiltrate Myath, take over the opponent's student council and cause chaos in their defense. I chose that plan because of Layfon Alseif. The fighting power of your team is a waste if you were to fight in a crowd."

"Ah, ha....."

"But if Layfon can't participate, then we've to adjust the plan. I'm thinking of whether sending Gorneo and Shante over instead....."

"So you're letting me duel with Haia?"

The two of them had yet to give a straight answer.

"Ah, about that," Karian asked Vance in a small voice. "I still haven't heard your opinion. We just jumped ahead to the plan."

"Isn't this obvious?" Vance said angrily but firmly. "Go. I'm angry at their trick, and intolerable of their using such low means as kidnapping. Use your full strength and let them know how foolish they are."

Both Nina and Layfon nodded at Vance's encouragement.

After the discussion on finer details, Karian called Layfon short as he was about to leave. "Though she has lots of problems, she's still my sister. I'm counting on you."

".....I would know that even if you didn't say it," he nodded and left the room.

After Nina and Layfon had left -

"I never thought you'd quickly agree to letting that guy leave the fight," Vance said, surprised.

"I'm also human, and I care for my family."

"Of course, but didn't you transfer him into Military Arts because of the Military Arts Competition?"

"You're right, but this year's fight probably isn't limited to just tomorrow. Besides, I hope he can come to a conclusion with the things that might cause trouble in the future. And....."

"And?"

"Layfon Alseif is a Military Artist, but he doesn't take pride in his fighting, and he doesn't want to protect any city. He is someone who fights for a certain person. And because of that, his power will be hard to handle once he's decided whom to fight for."

"Very troublesome personality."

"Yes, he probably wouldn't feel sad no matter how many normal people die without anyone knowing it."

"Because of a sense of danger?"

"Who knows....."

The reason that Vance felt uneasy was the same as Karian's. Chased out of his orphanage at Grendan, Layfon had been led by Nina Antalk's intense will. External things were more important to him, and he moved for them. If that person who could affect Layfon turned into someone other than Nina – Layfon might become an enemy.

"But it's all normal for now."

Layfon was moving to protect Felli. They couldn't tell whether it was for friendship or love. But he wouldn't have hesitated since Nina also supported him.

"All we can do now is trust him."



At this same moment, Felli was watching Zuellni's multi-legs through the window.

"This has become troublesome," she said to herself.

She was in a narrow room with the bed she sat on and a small desk as the only furniture. No chair. They probably thought the bed was enough. Light shaking constantly shook the room. Things were tossed into the air and fell with the rhythm of the steps. It was quite bothersome to her.



Felli was inside the large roaming bus of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang, imprisoned inside one of the rooms. Someone had attacked her after she parted with Layfon. When she came to, she found herself already in this room.

"Well, this isn't bad. I can calm myself down."

She was a bit angry over yesterday's events, but she also regretted it. She knew it'd be awkward when she next saw Nina, so the current situation was better than having to meet the Captain. Nothing else showed outside the window except the city's multi-legs. Having lost her Dite, Felli couldn't use psychokinesis. Even if Myath was to appear in front of her, the current Felli couldn't do anything.

The sound of the lock being unlocked came through the door.

"Excuse me....." A weak voice accompanied a tray in a hand. A familiar face peered from the door.

".....I don't recall your name but I know you. So this is a roaming bus."

"Ah, yes. Yes," Myunfa entered, not sure what to do. "I've brought the food. Sorry for being late."

"It's ok....." she lightly shook her head –

"What's going on!?"

"Ah!"

The angry howl of man came through the gap between the door and the wall. Myunfa was about to put the tray on the desk. She shivered at that howl and the soup splashed out of its bowl. If that man's voice was a notch louder, the soup might have splashed onto the bed.

"It seems something great has happened."

"Ah, hahaha....." Myunfa didn't say anything else, with a stiff smile on her face. "Then just call out when you finish. I'll come and clean it up. Call me if you need to go to the bathroom or anything else."

"OK," she nodded.

Myunfa escaped from the room.

".....I can only wait," Felli said to herself. She took up the spoon to fill her empty stomach.

"What're you planning!"

Haia had been surrounded. The angry howl came from a senior in the Mercenary Gang, whose influence was just below Fermaus. The rest of the Mercenary Gang stood behind him, angry and failing to comprehend the current situation as they studied Haia with suspicion.

In the end, the rest of the Mercenary Gang members knew of the kidnapping. Since Haia had moved all members to the facility inside the city besides himself, it was too late when the rest of the members found out.

"What're you planning, kidnapping the family of the Student President?" the man said in a lower voice, hearing Myunfa's voice from Felli's room.

"To settle the score with that guy."

".....Haia, do you want the Gang to break?"

Haia smiled. ".....Actually, this will happen sooner or later, no matter what we do," he said and explained to them the content of the letter he received from Grendan.

As expected, the contents of the letter caused a commotion within the members. The result of their long journey had been acknowledged, and the royalty had promised a great reward. It was a joy that no one could hide, whether they aimed for the reward or were loyal to the royalty.

"Didn't it say to leave the rest for the Heavens' Blade successor? What we have to do now is return to Grendan. We can leave after tomorrow's intercity match, then what happens next has nothing to do with us anymore."

".....But, I'm not interested in the reward from Grendan's royalty," Haia said directly. "I came here to settle this with him. After that, you can do whatever you like. But that's after tomorrow's duel. No one can interfere with me before that," he took back his smile, his gaze asking no objection.

A lot of the Gang members viewed Haia as their own son or brother. Taken in by Ryuhou and nurtured into an adult, Haia grew up in this roaming bus. All Gang members stood witness to it. On the other hand, he was also their

leader, the family member that they had to protect. But all that ended today.

"Haia, what do you truly think?" that man asked before giving up.

But Haia had nothing to say.

A new voice sounded beside him – Fermaus.

"Fermaus, say something," that man said.

Only Ryuhou and Fermaus could change Haia's opinion and make him bow his head. Haia might change his mind if the psychokinesist said something. Everyone watched him with anticipation. But they never thought he'd say something totally irrelevant.

"This had fallen there" Fermaus showed them something.

It was a hand-made stone that was the size of a palm, and tied onto it was a letter.

"This is....."

Everyone was drawn to the crest on the letter – Grendan's crest.

Haia took the letter, untied the small rope and took out the letter from the envelope.

".....Ha," he laughed after reading the content. "It seems the real Heaven's Blade is a monster."

He handed the letter to Fermaus.

"Fermaus.....What's written on it?"

Everyone moved his gaze to Fermaus and waited for him to explain.

"The Heaven's Blade successor Savaris Qaulafin Luckens is currently in Myath. He's planning to move over here when the two cities fight. Please distract Layfon when that happens, just in case he finds out and causes trouble."

"Meaning the Heaven's Blade we're relying on is coming tomorrow?" the man said, relieved. They weren't scared of the revenge of Zuellni's Military Artists. They were only scared of one person, Layfon.

In truth, many of them didn't think much of Heaven's Blade successors. They only fully understood the terror of Layfon after watching Layfon and Haia's match and Layfon's fight with the filth monsters. Hence they were all relieved, thinking that Layfon's target would move away from them. And Savaris's request made a timely excuse for the current trouble.

Saved. But only Haia showed an incomprehensible expression among the joy of the Gang members.

"He threw a stone over from Myath. Really, what a monster....."

And the stone had landed at the right place.

How strong was this person compared to Layfon? The burning flame in Haia burnt hotter. Under Fermaus' arrangement, the Gang members had split and moved. One half went to guard the roaming bus, one to wait at the facility in the city, providing the illusion of doing nothing. The rest infiltrated the city to monitor the Student Council and Layfon.

"Is it ok to stay here and do nothing?"

In the end, only Haia, Fermaus and Myunfa were left. There were also two other members that Haia trusted the most in the roaming bus, but they frowned, looking at his displeased face.

"Ha, anyway, my trust is all gone. Perhaps it's time to give up the position as the Gang's leader."

"So what?" An electric voice conveyed no feelings, but one could feel the laughter in there. They knew because they had lived together for a long time. Fermaus was laughing.

"Didn't you say that the Gang will disband no matter what we do?"

"Perhaps that might happen. But I don't remember saying to destroy it yourself rather than letting others do it."

"Nonsense."

"Then why do it so freely?"

".....Because this is my home," Haia said, patting the pipe on the wall. "I grew up here. I don't consider any city my home because this is my home."

"Ah, that's true," Fermaus said, thinking of the days from Haia's adoption to today.

"So for those who have their home cities, the bed of their home must be more comfortable than this place. But no matter how comfortable that bed is, no one would want to stay there forever."

"Haia....."

He stopped patting the pipe.

Fermaus understood. Haia wished to be isolated from the family that was the Mercenary Gang. He wanted to begin his own journey before losing everything. But for normal people, their families remained after they became independent. Their families would open their arms to them when they were tired, yet Haia had none. The day when the Mercenary Gang returned to Grendan was the day of its disappearance. Although that might not be the only result, Haia seemed to think that would happen.

"What's your plan from now on?"

"Who knows," he turned around with his usual expression. "I might just head for a few places first like normal travelers."

"I'll go too!" Myunfa shouted, from near Felli's room. Realizing what she had done, she lowered her head with her face red, yet strong determination was written on that red face of hers.

"I.....I want to go too."

"Uh—" Haia frowned at her courageous declaration. "Myunfa will drag me down."

"Wu....."

He laughed. She was next to tears. "Ahahaha, I was lying. Whatever you like."

"Uh.....Really?"

"I won't be the leader by that time, so I can't order you around. You can do anything."

"Wu.....Yeah," she smiled, wiping her tears. It was a smile that came from the bottom of her heart.



It was finally time to leave.

Savaris knocked on the door then entered the room.

"Ready?" he asked her. He widened his eyes at the condition in the room.

"You've cleaned it quite thoroughly."

Under the sunlight spilling in from the window, the room looked new.

"Ahahaha, I couldn't sleep yesterday....."

She had kept cleaning, unable to sleep from either excitement or tension.

"Well, never mind. People are about to head for the shelter. We have to grab the chance and leave."

"Ah, ok," she dragged her luggage as she followed him out.



The two cities' multi-legs seemed to weave together as the edges of the cities touched. The Student Presidents already waiting on the edge of respective cities signed the war contract. Unlike other intercity wars, a fight between Academy Cities didn't involve bloodshed. The purpose of signing the contract was to confirm that each city would fight under the regulations set by the Academy City Alliance, and that they would discuss any problems that arose. After that, the contract and the result of the Military Arts Competition would be sent to the Academy City Alliance.

After the signing event, each side spread out the map of their cities, confirming the areas designated for the war and appointing a time for the fight to begin.

Both sides had agreed to begin the fight at noon.

"I hope this will be a good competition," Karian said, sweeping his gaze past the Military Artists standing behind Myath's Student President.

Behind Karian stood Zuellni's Military Artists.

"Yes, same thought here," Myath's Student President said. Though he wasn't used to Karian's smile, he and Karian exchanged handshakes.

"What do you think?" Karian asked Vance.

"Very high morale."

"Yes. A quick check of our record, and anyone would think it's easy to beat us."

"True, but that probably isn't the only reason."

Karian understood the reason behind Vance's caution. Myath's Student President gave off a weak aura, but that was probably because of his personality. However, a strong desire to win shone in his eyes. And.....Karian's gaze turned to Myath. Myath showed huge traces of destructive power. Traces left by something huge.

"It seems to have traces left from using Kei cannons."

"Aaa, meaning it had recently fought filth monsters?"

"And won. That explains why their morale is so high."

"Humph, if we compare experience of filth monsters, no Academy City can match Zuellni," Vance said.

Karian smiled bitterly. "Well then, I'm leaving the rest to you, Chief Commander."

"Ah, leave it to me."



Leerin wouldn't know the happenings going on outside the facility. The passengers living in the facilities were all heading for the lobby under the guidance of the City Police. Though this was called a Competition, the battlefield involved the entire city area. Still, some areas related to the normal operation of the city were classified as no-fighting zones..... such as farming areas, pastures for livestock, factories for fishery, manufacturing zones that belonged to the Alchemy courses, medical facilities, water

purification system and electricity generators, underground Mechanical Departments, City Police areas, libraries, etc. Areas left over made up the stage for the Military Artists, and once the war began, normal people would be banned from entering those zones.

"What should we do?" Leerin asked Savaris in a small voice. They had sneaked out from the emergency exit of the facility.

"If we're to enter the other city, we have to go through the contact point."

"Is that right?"

"That's the only place shielded by the air shield. If we go any other way, we'll get burnt by pollutants."

"Um....."

Would they contact the pollutants? That'd be terrible.

"Anyway, we'll check out the outskirts. We must find a good timing to enter Zuellni, when the battle runs for a certain side. In that situation, no one would care even if I was carrying a person."

"Ah, sorry."

"Not at all, besides, I have to keep my promise to protect you."

Savaris had promised Synola. While feeling grateful, Leerin couldn't help but pity him for having to listen to the reckless Synola. A feeling of closeness to Savaris rushed up in Leerin.

"Huh? Savaris, don't you have luggage?" she realized he was empty-handed.

"Eh? Ahah, that's because I still have to ride Myath's roaming bus."

"Huh?"

"Nothing strange. My destination isn't Zuellni. Originally, I had to part from you here."

"Oh, I see."

He had to take her to Zuellni on top of keeping Synola's promise. That made her feel really bad.

"Sorry for troubling you."

"No worries. Besides, I quite like this game."

(A game.)

True. He did look happy. But it was hard to judge whether he really was happy or not. He was always smiling. Besides, he had to infiltrate Zuellni in the midst of an intense battle. It was a battle even though it was between Academy Cities. Savaris called it a "game". Leerin could truly feel the confidence that only a Heaven's Blade successor would have.

"Ah, that's right," Savaris clapped his hands.

"Yes?"

"If you see Layfon, don't let him know you came over with me."

"Eh?"

She didn't think of deliberately mentioning her travel with Savaris to Layfon. But he actually requested her not to. She cocked her head, not understanding.

"This is a secret mission, and it's better not to spread around the news of a Heaven's Blade sneaking out of Grendan."

"Oh, I see."

In that case, she would keep his secret.

"Thanks, then let's go. We have to find some place to pass the time," he took her luggage and walked out. Leerin followed.

Chapter 5 – A Fight of Katanas

The sound of the ringing bell pierced through the air at noon. A new meaning suffused this sound different from the usual meaning of lunch break. The shouts of Military Artists filled the air. Hundreds of Military Artists shouted with internal Kei, creating a huge noise that shook the air.

Simultaneously, the commanders of both sides gave the order to attack.

"Forward!" Vance shouted. The front line team, the 2nd platoon took the lead. At the same time, the leading group of Myath also attacked. High speed created waves of impact that spread out in the battlefield.

"We have similar numbers of people."

Myath had around 200 Military Artists, close to the number in Zuellni. The main problem was the number deployed in other areas. Zuellni had assigned 30 Military Artists and a suitable number of psychokinesists to reinforce team 11, which was assigned a defensive job. They would receive aid from the psychokinesists located in the center of the city in order to fight back Myath's infiltration teams.

The fight between lead elements had entered a stalemate. Vance's goal could be seen from the outskirts – Myath's flag fluttering in the middle of the city. The conditions for victory were either to take over the central command post or to destroy the Mechanical Department of the other city. Of course, Military Artists from both sides would do everything they could to prevent destroying the other's Mechanical Department. This was the same for any general city too. That was because the destruction of the Mechanical Department implied the city's death. Involving normal citizens wasn't humane. Although the city that had lost its selenium mines was also fated to die, the sense of guilt inferred was less than what would come from directly destroying the Mechanical Department. Hence the remaining key to victory was to overtake the Commanding post that was the building of the Student Council. Keep on moving forward despite the rain of bullets. Fight to obtain the fluttering flag of the other city. On a certain level, the Military Arts Competition was a large scale platoon match.

As a result, the fight on the outskirts wasn't the key to victory. The small group of people making up the infiltration team was decisive to the outcome of the battle.

"The second wave is to switch with the lead element. Cannon team, prepare to aim. Don't let the other side take this opening to attack us."

The cannon team began its preparation. At the same time, the 16th platoon that led the second wave gathered their Kei.

"Now!" Vance commanded.

The lead element began its retreat. Zuellni's gun fire stopped the lead element of Myath as the 16th platoon headed out, performing their best Whirl Kei.

At a place that was slightly away from the battlefield –

"How's it?" Sharnid said.

"Wait a bit more. Wait till the wave comes," Nina replied. She was observing the fight with a pair of binoculars. She and the others, wearing protective suits for outside city use, were located beneath Zuellni's multi-legs. Entering the city from outside the contact point wouldn't break the rules. And outside city gear use was permitted. In truth, Myath would probably also have an infiltration team ready.

This wasn't a surprising strategy since the fighting power of the infiltration team didn't amount to much. If the team was discovered, Zuellni would have lost in its strategy. Still, the value of an infiltration team couldn't be denied. But Vance had sent Nina and the others for infiltration work because he wanted to win in the main fight.

It was meaningless not to win. In that way, Nina felt the same.

"The second wave is about to fight back. If they can smoothly distract the enemies.....That'd be our chance," she said, looking at Gorneo who stood beside her.

He nodded silently.

In the end, Gorneo and Shante had replaced the vacancy created by Layfon. Nina didn't tell Gorneo why that change was made. They only announced publicly that Layfon was given a special mission. Still, many people showed signs of incomprehension. Since Gorneo had replaced Layfon, he probably now knew the reason behind it, but he gave no objection to the change of plan.

"The second wave has begun," Naruki said. She had taken over the job of observing through the binoculars.

Since all members were sustaining Sakkei, they had no way of using large scale Kei techniques.

"Good, then we'll get closer."

Along with that, their outer city gear was of the old style. Old helmets that weren't made for psychokinesis support to widen the field of vision. But, since they couldn't find anyone with Felli's ability to track over a large area, they had to move without psychokinesis support.

Underneath Myath, the team shot out ropes to hook onto the pipes under the city. They climbed up to the outskirts of Myath.

Another world showed outside the helmet. It seemed they hadn't been discovered yet.

"OK, go," Nina said. All members nodded their understanding, and they moved at high speed for the building of the Student President.



The Intercity war had begun.

"And I....."

Felli had no other thoughts than shock. The city on the other side of Zuellni must be an Academy City. She could feel the stirring in the air and hear the sound of fights. It really had begun.

"Did he plan it this way?"

Haia must have considered the timing of the intercity fight before kidnapping her. But then, why?

"For the Haikizoku.....But why must he kidnap me?"

If she had to find a reason for it, was it because she was a psychokinesist? Zuellni's fighting strength must have been affected without a strong psychokinesist like Felli. But what good would this do for the Mercenary

Gang? Did they know the Haikizoku was now in Nina's body? Were they planning to use the Student President's sister to exchange for Nina?

"I never thought I'd drag everyone down....." She blamed herself. She was angry for failing to predict this outcome. And she could do nothing without her Dite. Now all she could do was let loose the few flakes she had and check the outside situation. She could use the Kei storm if she had the Dite.....

(Wait.....)

The Mercenary Gang was the one that kidnapped her. They must have experienced fighters here in addition to the number of Military Artists guarding the roaming bus. A psychokinesis wasn't enough to fight them. Besides, her psychokinesis had been sealed.

"Unbelievable....." she sighed, shocked and feeling insulted.

In fact, she didn't need the Dite to use psychokinesis because of her inborn amount of Kei power. The Mercenary Gang didn't seem to have discovered that yet. A small hope rose in Felli. Her silvery hair began to shine as she attempted to release psychokinesis.

"Uh....."

As that feeling was about to seep through the room, an intense sound that hurt her head assaulted her. She had no choice but to drop her power.

"Fermaus....." she remembered the name of the Gang's psychokinesis.

It was a usual tactic used during platoon match to interfere with the psychokinesis and reduce the detective functions of the other team. Felli had also succeeded in taking over the enemy's flakes, including Fermaus', but this was her first time having her psychokinesis cut off. Her bad luck was to fight against an experienced other. It was the same when she fought the first platoon. But she had yet to come across someone who was as powerful as her. Even though her enemy had lots of experience, she could react if she managed to see through the other's trap. However, she would be in a terrible disadvantage if the other possessed both power and experience. In other words, she had much to learn in how to react to someone whose real strength was beyond hers, particularly now that she didn't have her Dite. Felli gave up resisting and waited.

Pain remained in Felli's forehead. She leaned against the wall.

"So I can only wait for rescue."

.....Would anyone come to save me? Who would that person be? Kidnapping her was meaningless if the Gang just leave her here.....If it was for negotiation, her brother would come? That was the most realistic possibility. But she was still second guessing the Gang's true objective. If their aim was the Haikizoku, then Nina might come.

"Fon Fon.....Will he save me....."

Her thought stopped there. Layfon was obviously shaken when Nina went missing. Felli didn't want to see how shaken he was with worry but she couldn't just leave him. She did all she could to support him instead. Would he worry about her like that time? Would he save her? She realized her palms held chill sweat. An empty and icy feeling flitted in the depth of her brain. What was the relationship between her and Layfon? Something cold ran through her body whenever this question came up. Classmates in the same school? Friends? Comrades in the same team? Senpai and junior? Male and female? Romance? Lovers? She understood well the possibility of each candidate. For someone as slow as him, he probably would never realize unless she told him in a straightforward way. Why. Why was he so slow when it came to others' feelings? That was incomprehensible.

(Aaa, really.....I hate this.)

Felli's heart swayed left and right because of Layfon. She said nothing furthermore but mumbled in her heart.

At that time, an intense shaking hit the roaming bus.

"What....."

The second wave of impact shook the entire room, a shaking that made Felli grab hold of the edge of the bed. The roaming bus was swaying?

"What....."

She used psychokinesis reflexively, forgetting Fermaus was blocking her power, but no interference was forthcoming. Was it because of the shaking? Or that Fermaus was destroyed?

The members of the Gang were outside the roaming bus along with Haia. They were fighting.....

".....Layfon."

Layfon was fighting! A large roaming bus was parked at the roaming bus station, tied by a sturdy rope. It swayed and made metallic noises every time wind blew past it. Haia was now standing in front of that roaming bus.

"So you did come alone," he said.

Layfon surveyed him and everyone else with emotionless eyes. "I don't need any strategies against you guys. I alone am enough."

"Ha, you still like to joke. If you provoke me, then I can't guarantee that lady's safety."

Blackmailing, yet Layfon didn't back down.

"Give it a try if you're bold enough.....But please also seriously consider whether you can then live in this world."

Layfon's right wrist suddenly disappeared. Explosions and a tragic yell sounded in the path of his stretched wrist. Layfon's Kei had hit one of the Gang members and made him faint. That attack implied a warning for Haia.

"I'm only here to fight you. Release Felli-senpai afterwards. I can guarantee the safety of everyone here. The Student President will not ask after this offense."

That was true. If they took offense at the Mercenary Gang's actions, they might end up pushing the Gang into a desperate fight. And if anything happened in the key moment in the fight with Haia, even Layfon might not be enough to handle them.

"And he hopes the Gang can sign the contract to continue teaching Zuellni's Military Artists. He'll also negotiate the payment. Unlike me, the Student President is very kind."

Layfon didn't care whether the Gang would accept the suggestion. He was just using Zuellni's attitude to keep the Gang from making a harmful move.

"Sounds pretty good, but there's one more condition, right?"

The condition was for Layfon to use the Katana.

"....."

He wordlessly took out the Shim Adamantium Dite. ".....It isn't difficult to betray one's beliefs. That can be done anytime. But it's different when it's forced....."



Restoration. The dark blade seemed to suck in the red and blue sunlight of noon.

"This can't be settled carelessly."

"Just as I wanted," Haia restored his Dite.

Katana and Katana. Both fighters used the Psyharden technique. Layfon's Shim Adamantium Dite had a safety mechanism set in so he couldn't kill another with one swing of the blade. However, Haia's Dite had no such limitation. The rest of the Mercenary members couldn't predict the effect caused by this difference. Perhaps this was enough to decide who would win this duel.

The two of them lifted their weapons at the same time. They waited for the opening to strike as they made the same pose. The scene during the match against the 10th platoon seemed to be repeating itself. Numerous Katana strike paths and reacting paths lay in the space between the two. Having inherited the same moves, the two of them could easily predict the direction of the other. They could probably judge the other's plan through the weak change in breath and make adjustments to react to that intention. They stayed like that in a stalemate for a while.....

"Aaaa~h"

"Arrr~"

Both shouted at the same time and ran for each other. The middle where the Kei clashed exploded. The two engaged in a fight of Kei as if they were trying to destroy the weapons in their own hands.

"Aaaaaaaaaa~h"

Perhaps this was within predictions. After the first strike, the advantage fell to Layfon. Haia's cut path didn't work against him. The density of Layfon's Kei was overwhelmingly high. Haia's Kei was swallowed by that Kei and deflected.

Haia's body flew a long distance away. He managed to stop the momentum to stand at the edge of the city. However, Layfon's attack continued. He had chased after Haia to execute his second strike. Haia blocked that strike with his full strength and tried counterattacking, but Layfon remained rooted on the spot as if his feet had fused with the earth.

This meant that every time he took a step forward, he was pushing Haia a step back. Chaotic Kei flows enveloped the space between them.

Suddenly, Kei that stirred like a lively creature appeared above their heads, gradually creating a whirl in the air. Something was about to reveal itself.

"No!" Fermaus sensed the danger. He was observing from a side.

The typhoon Kei dropped straight on Haia.

External Kei variation – Snake fall.

The Kei trapped Haia inside it, swept him off the ground and flew him to the outskirts of the city. But Haia wouldn't just leave it at that.

"Ahahahaha!"

He drew the blade close to his waist and pressed on the blade with his left hand. A flash appeared on the Katana. Flames shook on its surface!

That was just a quick illusion. Flame burst forth the instant the Kei flowing on the blade touched the fire-triggering device set on his left hand. The strike hidden behind that flame cut through Layfon's typhoon.

Psyharden technique – Flame cut.

The problem now was that Haia was already at the very edge of the outskirt and Layfon didn't hesitate to cancel the typhoon but kept pressing on. He had no choice but to make a swift decision. This arena had become narrow before Layfon's overwhelming Kei. But the space of movement in front of Haia had been sealed. In that case.....? He suddenly understood his opponent's intention.

"Fine. As you wish."

He leaned back, his feet holding onto the edge of the city. He could just barely make out the ground far below him. When he had leaned back till a certain degree, Layfon was before him.

The Kei exploded in his feet. Internal Kei variation – Whirl Kei. Haia jumped for the city far behind him – Myath. Following close behind, Layfon also leaped off Zuellni's edge.



Savaris felt it, the presence of Kei that rose like the ocean's waves.

"It's begun."

"Eh?" Leerin lifted her head to look at him.

They were currently inside a building close to the contact point. It was a musical arena altered from an old warehouse. Savaris was looking out the small window in the lobby.

"Nothing.....Let's go."

"Ah, ok," she followed him.

"So how do we get to the other side?"

They moved outside underneath the noonday sun. Leerin squinted, feeling a little dizzy. At this distance, even a normal person could see the fight at the contact point. Thrown into chaos by Zuellni's second wave, the Military Artists of Myath had now recomposed themselves and began their counterattack. The situation was still a stalemate. Though Leerin didn't know much about the details of a war, she could tell how difficult it was to get past the large crowd of Military Artists without being detected.

"I remember I explained it to you before?"

"Uh, yes. Carrying me....."

"Then, excuse me."

"Ah~"

Savaris took her luggage with one hand and carried her with another. A light jump took them up to the rooftop.

"Um.....Good, this level of height should be about it?"

"Uh, excuse me, can you say it again.....?"

He smiled at her uneasy look then fell into silence.

"Oh yes, Leerin-san, you don't look like you're good at sports. Can you hold your breath for one minute?"

"Yeah, if it's that level," she nodded, feeling like a fool.

"That's good then," he crouched as if he was doing stretching exercise. He shouldn't be able to do any high speed movement while carrying a person, but.....

"Hold your breath now and please hold on tight~"

Her body naturally tightened as she held her breath. Confirming she was ready, he released all the Kei gathered in his knees and jumped.

It wasn't a leap to fly past the contact point. It was a leap upward into the sky that took them up to the limit of the air shield. The contact point was right beneath them. He had deliberately aimed for the height.

(Nobody should notice when we're this high.)

If they had moved normally, a psychokinesist might have detected Leerin's breath. But no one would think that someone would infiltrate a city from outside the air shield.

(But.....)

Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang had successfully distracted Layfon, the only person that Savaris was worried of noticing them. On the other hand, he was now concentrating on Sakkei to mask his and Leerin's presence. Even if he was found out later, the other side would've thought it a figment of imagination as nobody was detected having performed such a jump.

The heat of the main fight and the impact created by Kei had put the atmosphere into a chaotic swirl. Shouldering the invisibly huge pressure above him, he used the airflow to aid him forward. The path leap was like a large parabola. Though he was blown a little bit this way and that in the atmosphere, he managed to land in Zuellni.

.....The landing was quiet. He tapped Leerin's shoulder.

"It's ok now."

"Eh?.....Eh?" she had closed her eyes during the jump. She looked around. "This.....this is?"

"Yes, Zuellni."

"....." her feet touched the ground. She looked at the buildings before her, numb. "This is where Layfon is....."

She had finally arrived, but at a place she was unfamiliar with. Her uncertainty of meeting the person she knew gave her hesitation, and she stood, forgetting to react. But she at last came to and turned around to bow deeply before Savaris.

"Thank you very much."

"No no, I only did it to keep the promise."

Though the Queen's order still held, he'd just let Leerin think otherwise. His decision actually didn't have any deep reason behind it. It'd be troublesome if the Military Artist he met in Myath was a student of Zuellni. The information that Savaris had been in Myath would leak out one way or the other. Perhaps Layfon already knew he was there. In that case, Leerin's actions to keep this event a secret would be meaningless.

Savaris planned to stay in Zuellni and eventually bring the Haikizoku back to Grendan. That was the Queen's order but Leerin had no need to know of it. Not only that, Savaris had made up a lie to buy himself time.

(I'm just of this level.)

He had never viewed himself as a strategist. He was a fighter, and he moved like a fighter.

(So.....Does that mean he's now being isolated?)

That was for Layfon. Leerin was the person whom Layfon protected in Grendan, and who knew nothing of the truth. How would she affect Layfon? Or perhaps he wouldn't be affected at all? Savaris wanted to know just out of curiosity.

"Anyway, you better find someplace and hide. If you find a shelter, stay there and don't move. I might have to leave first."

"Ah, I got it. Thanks very much."

".....Then, take care," he said and disappeared. "Next, time to get some information."

He had already made the decision long ago to reach that place – Zuellni's facilities for travelers. The remnants of Kei waves were limited to the

outskirt areas. The air in here was still as always. He could hear the sound of the fight drifting from the contact point, but it wasn't that loud. A huge roaming bus stood in the bus station, surrounded by a number of Military Artists. They must be members of the Mercenary Gang.

"Did my luggage arrive?" he asked, and everyone else turned to him with shocked expressions. It appeared no one had noticed him while he was using Sakkei.

".....Is my request too difficult?"

Yes, there existed a level of difficulty in his request. However, Layfon hadn't noticed him infiltrating the city. This meant he had been lured to somewhere away from the contact point.

"Haia's fighting him on his own, and that was of his own volition. He did something that didn't suit his position as the leader of the Gang. His name's been taken off the list of the Gang," Fermaus said.

"I see....."

There might be a story behind it, but Savaris had no interest in listening more. He didn't feel that there was anything interesting in that content. On the other hand, he turned his gaze to the direction where he felt Layfon's presence. Internal Kei strengthened his vision and helped him track down Layfon.

".....Though he's been exiled, he's still a rare elite."

"Thanks. I'm sure if he heard that himself, he'd be happier."

Two more people appeared behind Fermaus. A girl who was about Savaris' age ran to the edge of the city and looked at Myath in desperation. Her level wasn't as good as Savaris, but she tried all she could to strengthen her vision. That desperation of hers was worth the admiration. The other person was a girl, wearing what looked to be the city's uniform. Beneath the long silvery hair was a beautiful face. But Savaris' interest wasn't on her face. He felt that this girl possessed an extremely high level of psychokinesis.

"Are you letting me go here?" She said to Fermaus in anger.

"Yes, but I can't return the Dite to you yet. If you enter the fight, he might not keep to the promise."

"Is that so?" she said and left.

It seemed that they kidnapped her to lure Layfon in. Losing interest in the girl, Savaris turned his gaze back to Myath.

(Layfon, allow me to see what level you're at now.)

His gaze was glued to the fight between Layfon and Haia from now on.



A blink of an eye was all the time it took him to reach Myath, his body exposed to the pollutants. Before the burning sensation submerged itself in his body, he had entered Myath's shield and the pollutants dissipated off his body. Haia landed on the outskirt of the city as Layfon entered the air shield.

Layfon attacked, using the momentum of the Whirl Kei. Haia countered with Flame Cut. Illusory flames scattered and a huge explosion sounded. Different from the first attack, the flame kept dancing on Haia's blade. His Dite was a combination of steel and Ruby Dite. This was his special made Dite. When he wished for it, his Kei ran through the Ruby Dite to form flames.

"Don't think I'm still the same as before."

Shock showed on Layfon's face at Haia's fighting stance. This wasn't a Psyharden technique. In a sidle, Haia hid his fatal point with his arm drawn up, the handle of the blade above his shoulder, the blade pointing downward. The flame prevented Layfon from seeing his Kei flow. Layfon didn't move. He might have understood the implication in Haia's posture?

"Then allow me to begin," Haia moved.

Internal Kei variation – Fleeting Shadows. The presences scattered around threw themselves at Layfon.

Layfon stood firm, so firm that he couldn't even feel the light shake of the very tip of his Katana. Having seen through the cut path that swung to his right hand side, he jumped ahead of the enemy's blade. Haia gave chase. The two of them headed deeper into the city.

They crossed blades a number of times in the air. Haia's sword technique matched that of a Heaven's Blade successor. This fight confirmed that fact once again. Though none of Haia's moves had yet to injure Layfon's fatal points, Layfon was surprised at his opponent's special attacks. If he could grab hold of the opening shown through the releasing of the move and attacked accordingly, he should be able to deal quite some damage. However, Haia's strength was different. Layfon took the Heaven's Blade title through the power of Kei that he was born with. He couldn't possibly have finished Behemoth if he relied on technique alone.

Haia's flame Kei and his non-Psyharden technique created cut paths that always went beyond Layfon's expectations. One would reflexively follow a certain defensive pattern because one was familiar with the attacks of his opponent. But Haia always changed his attack at the last moment to something unexpected.

The two of them repeatedly fought above Myath. Layfon could defend well if he could read the other's Internal Kei flow. But the heat from the Flame Kei blurred his vision. In the end, he could only react by instinct, and consequently, he was reacting according to Haia's attacks. This was the disadvantage born out of the two of them coming from the same Military Arts school. In addition, he had less experience than Haia and the influence of Psyharden pulled that gap further apart. Attacking Haia's psychology in the last fight might have been key to Layfon's previous victory.

"Tsk!"

In that one swift moment when the two Katanas crossed blades, Layfon made a feint, a kick at Haia's stomach, and pulled open a little distance between them. He used this chance to gather Kei to his left hand. External Kei variation – Nine bullets.

He shot out four Kei arrows, but Haia twisted his body and evaded all four attacks. On the other hand, the side-effect of the move made Layfon's feet stand on air for a moment. Haia landed first and jumped for him through Whirl Kei.

External Kei variation – Flame Snake.

As part of the Snake Fall variation, the typhoon of flame Kei headed for Layfon. Layfon ran Internal Kei throughout his entire body while he resisted

the pressure generated by the wind, attempting to leap for the opposite direction before the flame surrounded him.

Haia seized this chance to get closer to Layfon. They swung their Katana at the same time.

"Aaaaaa~"

"Haaaaa~"

Psyharden technique – Flame Cut.

Same move. The illusory flames clashed and cut open everything around them. The huge amount of Kei hidden in the blades clashed and deflected their opponents.

Forced to fend off Flame Snake, Layfon executed Flame Cut before his strength had fully recovered. As such, that had created an opening for Haia. It was just a very small opening, so small an opening that it might not be less than 1/100 of a second, but this tiny amount of time might be able to determine one's life and death.

Haia immediately took a step forward.

Psyharden technique – Flame Weight.

The blade flashed as Layfon, sensing danger, hurriedly retreated. Blood spurted from Layfon's left wrist.



At the same moment, Felli was sighing lightly somewhere in Zuellni.

"I fail to help at all."

This wasn't just about her being kidnapped. No matter how unsettled her heart was, it was now useless to regret the past. She was happy to see Layfon come for her, but he had to fight Haia because of her. She still didn't know what Haia's aim was, but reality was that Haia had kidnapped her. The most pressing thing to do now was to let Layfon know she was safe.

Felli headed for the building of the Student Council.

She had decided not to head for a shelter. Besides, she'd be reproved if she went there. Even though she had a reason to evacuate, she had little to defend against her current situation. She must go to the Student Council. Besides, heading for a shelter did little to help her make contact with Layfon.

(Student Council.....)

She needed a Dite. She would find one in the Student Council building. However, Myath's infiltration team was fighting against Zuellni's defense line. That would put considerable obstruction in her path. Felli halted her steps.

"Fu....."

She could use psychokinesis even without the flakes. She regulated her breathing and her hair began to shine. Though her senses were weak, she had somehow managed to take stock of the situation. A Dite would provide her with more accurate information, and with a Dite, she could aid Layfon and let Nina know she was safe. She had thought of taking over someone else's flakes, but that task still required a Dite.

Either way, her current mission was to understand the situation she was in.

The number of Military Artists in Myath's infiltration team was about the same as Zuellni's. But Felli remembered that there should be more Military Artists guarding Zuellni. Was it because the enemies were infiltrating from different locations?

(Anyway, first find a safe route.)

As she thought of that, she discovered something else.

(A person?)

Someone was hiding in the shadow of a building. Probably stuck there because of the fight. Felli thought it was Myath's Military Artist, masking his presence through Sakkei, but this person looked flustered. Felli couldn't feel this person's Kei. Besides, this person's clothes failed to identify her. She was wearing a skirt.

(How clumsy.)

A normal student who hadn't managed to reach the shelter in time. Felli couldn't let this go. Though the residential area for female students had yet

to become a battlefield, the fight might come later. Calculating a safe route, Felli headed for the person.

"What're you doing?"

"Ah!" the girl turned around. "Ah.....Ah.....Sorry, I....."

Holding her luggage, she tried to express something. Did she miss the timing to enter a shelter because she had to pack her personal things?

"No matter. Hurry to the shelter," Felli said.

The fight between the defense team and the infiltration team continued. Felli took the girl's hand and walked away, not knowing whether the fight might spill over to where they were. She searched for the shelter's entrance as they moved. The other girl didn't say anything, seemingly drawn to Felli's shining hair.

As she had thought, there was more than one infiltration team. In that case, they had to go the long way to the Student Council and the shelter, and it might also bring them danger. Felli was all right on her own, but since she was with a normal student, they must avoid any possible danger.

"In that case, it's better wait here before the fight ends."

Zuellni had deployed a vast amount of defensive weapons. It was better to wait a bit rather than brave those automatic machines.

"So, sorry."

"It's ok, since I can't do anything for this Military Arts Competition."

(Though I want to contact Layfon.)

"Eh?"

"No, nothing."

For some reason, Felli felt that her heart had been read. She cut through the other's question. "Forget that. Let's go."

Ignoring the girl, she exerted all her psychokinetic strength and searched for a safe place.



The intense fight between Zuellni's defense team and Myath's infiltration teams matched the intensity of the fight in Myath. Myath's defense team pursued Nina's team. Evading as many unnecessary fights as possible, Nina's team headed for the Student Council building.

"Don't stop. Keep moving! Else they'll catch up," Nina urged.

"So annoying!" Shante shouted back, her face showing she wanted to turn back and fight her pursuers, but it was still too early to counterattack.

They weren't just running away. A number of Myath's students had been chasing them from the rooftops. They now all jumped back to the ground. Compared to simple chasing and jumping here and there, it was quicker to just run.

Three people landed on the ground, planning to rejoin the main team and interfere with the speed of Nina's team from behind.

"Uhah!" Before they could do anything, they were paralyzed by an intense pain on their backs.

Dalshena, Naruki, Gorneo and Shante were with Nina.

Not Sharnid. His bullets were hitting the defense team from behind. He had parted from the team when they reached Myath. He was now protecting the team from behind them. Thanks to that, his presence only appeared in the moment of a shot.

Confirming that the threat behind them was gone, Nina and the team continued moving forward. The path they were on wasn't connected directly to the building of the Student Council. The map didn't show these small paths, so the team could only run by instinct. Metallic shadows emerged the moment they entered a small path. A close study showed numerous shooting holes covering the path – Myath's defensive weapons.



"Away!" Dalshena shouted. The team scattered right and left.

Dalshena headed in with her lance held high. A large number of anesthetic bullets shot out along with flame.

"Haahhhhhhhh!"

The Kei gathered at the tip of her lance shot out to rent the air apart. The external Kei created a defensive wall and deflected all the bullets. She then pierced through all defensive mechanisms with the lance. The sound of breaking metal accompanied successive waves of explosions.

"Ugh....."

Dalshena's fighting clothes had been damaged, Blood seeped through it. The explosions had also damaged her lance to the point that it couldn't be used. On the other hand, the presence of enemies were closing in.

"Hurry!" Nina shouted.

Dalshena spun the handle of the lance and pulled out the thin blade hiding beneath the cracked surface.

"I won't let them through!" She turned around and attacked the defense team closing on them. Sharnid's gunfire sounded around her.

They continued to close in on the student counsel building. Slightly different from Zuellni's spire, if they used internal Kei to increase their vision, they could see their objective, the city flag.

"Go with the original plan."

"Counting on you."

Nina and Naruki nodded at Gorneo's reminder, and they increased their speed. Gorneo and Shante jumped to land on a rooftop. Myath's Military Artists found them the moment they landed.

"Let's go."

"Yeah!"

The two of them ran straight for the Student Council's building. Around ten of Myath's Military Artists came to block them off. Kei exploded throughout their bodies. Karen Kei. Wind surrounded Gorneo's Dite as flame writhed on Shante's spear. They entered the fight.

In the end, Nina and Naruki were left to head for the Student Council's building. They could still feel the presence of enemies, but no one stood between them and the building. They had to consider how many more Military Artists were left to guard the building.....The number shouldn't be too large. Taking into account the people involved in the main fight at the contact point, the infiltration teams, the number spread throughout the city for defensive measure, only around 10 or so Military Artists should be left around the building. Still, it was difficult to find an opening and take the flag.

"Speaking of which, is this suitable to leave me till the end?" Naruki sighed as she ran, pressured and uneasy.

"As I said before, can we stop now that we've come this far? Keep running!"

"Right!"

Actually, Nina had the same feeling. There were many Military Artists more powerful than Nina in Zuellni, such as Gorneo, Vance and others. She was given the infiltration mission because of Layfon. Strange that the mission remained the same even though Layfon couldn't enter the fight.

She held a question for the deployment of her team. Did they think she might create danger in the main fight because of the Haikizoku in her? She had harbored that speculation.

Vance had explained before the war, "Your team has the most experience in fights under extreme circumstances, so you people are the best candidates."

Extreme circumstances. True, they had had these experiences when it came to dangerous mission. The fight with the aged phase filth monster, in the ruined city, with the 10th platoon.....Nina's platoon had managed to pull through every time. However, that was when Layfon was with them. Or one could say that they managed to pull through fully because Layfon was there.

Besides, Karian had also said that Nina was the one who commanded Layfon's actions. But Nina thought she had the responsibility to make plans for the team's actions, as the platoon's captain. However, she had been straightforward with her intentions in order to pull Layfon along, and that had often put them both in danger.

One thing was certain though. She had never viewed Layfon's strength as her own. She understood how weak she was without him.

"We can only keep going now!" she said to confirm her resolve.

This wasn't the time to say "I can't do it". They had no other places to retreat to. Sharnid, Dalshena, Gorneo and Shante, and Vance and other Military Artists were fighting desperately. Their fights allowed Nina and Naruki to stand here.

A number of Military Artists waited around the building.

Time to follow the plan.

"Naruki!"

Naruki tossed out the rope, already clear of what Nina wanted. This new Dite that Harley made was able to restore a second time to extend the length of the rope. Actually, she still couldn't control the rope's length until a short while ago. Gorneo's teaching in Karen Kei had helped her control it.

The rope rose with the increase of Kei. It successfully hooked around the flag's pole. Pulling at the rope, Naruki jumped.

Military Artists appeared before her.

"Come!" Nina released a huge amount of Kei as she ran. The tension in her heart was so high that it was about to burst.

Combined Internal and External Kei Variant – Raijin.

A huge pillar of thunder fell as if to chop the sky apart. It pierced through the door of the building and its impact caught the things around it in an explosion. An aftermath storm blew the lobby into pieces, sweeping away the Military Artists in its wake. But Nina had also felt that impact.

(Um.)

She released the remaining Kei and felt exhaustion seeping in.

"Captain!" Naruki called, hanging from the rope.

".....Ah!" she cheered herself and jumped with Internal Kei. She took Naruki's hand in the air and together, the two of them headed for the top of the building.

Nina's previous move had not eliminated all enemies. The rope suddenly loosened and the two girls fell, losing their balance. The remaining Military Artists inside the Student Council building had reached the top and cut through the rope.

"Senpai!"

Balancing herself in midair, Naruki kicked off the wall of the building and gathered her strength.

"Counting on you!"

She threw Nina.

Waiting on top were two Military Artists. If she were in her normal condition, she would somehow pull it off. However, Nina having used the Raijin technique and furthermore using a large quantity of Kei had put her in a state of deep exhaustion.

But, nevertheless.....

"I can only do what I can!"

No help was left around her. Mentally prepared, she readied the iron whips in midair.

The two Military Artists rushed her with swords. She blocked the attack as she landed on the roof that was shaped like a pyramid. The fighting shoes helped her stay upright on the steep surface of the roof. The two swords pressed down on her weapons, and the weight of the swords caused the soles of the shoes to steam with friction. She gritted her teeth and took the pressure on her wrists. The chance she now had would be gone if she was pushed off the roof. Also, Myath's Military Artists would reach here if she failed to take care of these two in a hurry.

"Ha!"

The amount of her Kei exceeded that of the two people's in an instant and sent them flying. The two retreated to just before the flag. They readied their fighting stances without hesitation and renewed their attack.

The remnants of the Raijin move remained in Nina's body, making it hard for her to control her own Kei. The impact of Kei from the swords almost pushed her off the roof several times. She had no choice but to keep swinging the iron whips to keep her balance.

Finally, unable to take the impact of the Chrome Dite, one person lost his sword. Nina seized that chance and kicked the enemy's stomach, sending him flying. The Military Artist rolled down the roof and fell off it.

One more to go.

Nina ran for the flag. The moment she took the flag was the moment when Myath lost the match. She must do all she could to reach that goal.

The enemy sped close to her. Nina swung behind her, the iron whip clashing with the sword.

"Get lost!"

"Why don't you!"

Both of them could not retreat. They shouted, not backing off one step. Nina and Myath's Military Artists released External Kei together. Whirls formed above their heads, and the huge energy sent them both flying.

In one swift moment, Nina felt luck on her side. The weight of the iron whips in her hands prevented her from flying too far. However, that weight still felt like huge slabs of rocks. Her opponent was tossed up above the building whereas Nina's was a downward direction. The iron whips would increase her falling rate so she let go of her weapons before they became a burden.

She ran for the flag. No room to even think of gathering Kei. The flag was right before her. All she needed was take it and ensure Zuellni's victory. She recalled the last Military Arts Competition, recalling how Zuellni had lost again and again so it only had one selenium mine left. She recalled how she had been useless and couldn't do anything. What couldn't she do now that she was about to touch victory?

Just a bit more.

(If I take this down.)

But luck ended here. No, the sense of luck was just her imagination.

Myath's Military Artist, the city's last defense line, stood up and crashed into her with his body.

The flag was so far away now.

The two of them rolled down the steep surface of the roof.

"No.....!"

She wanted to push him away but it was too late. Her feet were in the air as she slid down the roof.

(And I managed to reach this place.)

Did she make a mistake in the last moment? How should she face all those people who placed their hope in her? Gorneo, Shante.....

At the time when she was sunk in deep self-reproach and regret.....

Rumble!

A pillar of light shot from behind her and the top of the pyramid exploded. The flag shook, leaned towards Nina, and fell.

(Layfon?)

That wasn't just instinct. Only Layfon could get the timing right and make such a powerful move without hurting Myath's Military Artist.

(Is he stupid? Thinking of others while he's in that situation.)

But it was true that the bitterness and pain in her heart had turned warm. Nina snatched up the fallen flag. Victory was decided in that instant.



His left wrist was dead. At least, he couldn't move it in this fight. Layfon had made calm judgment while hot blood ran. It must be luck that his right hand wasn't injured.

At the same time, a sound cut through the air. The sound of a long electric voice rose above the sound of fights. The announcement to the end of the war came from the building of Myath's Student Council.

".....You did it," Haia said, angry despite the fact that the tide had turned for him. "That Kei wasn't aimed at me."

".....You didn't give me a chance."

Haia hadn't had any openings in his defense at the time Layfon shot forth the Nine Bullets. The end result was Layfon's injured left hand. However, that shot was perfect timing as Nina's reinforcements.

"My aim is to help Zuellni win."

Karian had transferred him into Military Arts for that purpose, and that was why he had met Nina.

"I've already let you take the upper-hand. It's not good if you kept saying such spoiled things."

"What did you say?"

"But I admit I've done what I'm not used to doing....."

Actually, he was used to fighting with a burden. At Grendan, that burden was the orphanage. This time it was different in a sense. Haia's interference had stopped him from realizing what he had also strove for – participating in the Military Arts Competition. Nina's mission would have been easy for him, but he ended up having to give it to her alone. In a battlefield, Layfon would rather do his best from the beginning than trust others. Hence, his heart refused to calm down at the fact that he had to suddenly let go and leave the mission to others. He wouldn't have been able to stand himself if he hadn't done what he just did.

"Speaking of which, aren't you the same, doing what you're not used to?"

"What nonsense are you talking about....."

"Aren't you the leader of the Mercenary Gang?"

Layfon had once fought filth monsters with them. He noticed at that time that the Mercenary Gang had sent members to fight with Haia even though Haia could have defeated the filth monster on his own. The Gang took the path to reduce danger.

"Haven't you been relying on the comrades that you trust on the battlefield?"

On the contrary, Layfon had always been fighting alone when he was a Heaven's Blade successor. The power of a Heaven's Blade successor far exceeded that of a normal Military Artist. Heaven's Blades tended to only form teams with fellow Heaven's Blades. And that would only happen in incidents such as the one with Behemoth.

"Standing alone here is in itself a mistake," Layfon said.

A Military Artist who was used to trusting others. A Military Artist who was used to fighting alone. Both had chosen a fight style that differed from their past.

"Yet....."

The electric voice left an echo in Myath's sky. The faraway fight was dying down.

"Now I can leave everything and concentrate on this fight."

Though he didn't know how Nina and the others fared in Myath, he didn't have to worry now. As for Felli, she shouldn't be in any danger if she was just used to threaten him. He didn't know about the other Mercenary Gang members, but he felt Fermaus could be trusted.

He felt that he had picked up the feeling he had in past fights.

Layfon's left hand hung by his side. He slowly turned the dark blade of the Shim Adamantium Dite to the left of his waist. This was obviously the pose readied to pull out a blade and strike.

Psyharden's technique – Flame Cut.

"Though you hold a Katana, what you know is still a far distance from Derek's essence. You can only use tricks to confuse people. Let me show you the real Psyharden technique."

".....How dare you!" Haia readied the same pose, even while knowing Layfon was provoking him.

(Good.)

In truth, he couldn't drag out the fight in his current condition. Blood still spurted from his left wrist. The nerves in his wrist might have been cut.

One move to decide the outcome of the duel. He gathered his Kei for this purpose.

"Uh!"

His left wrist hurt. His body naturally used the aid of Internal Kei to help resist the effects of rising density of the Kei. His blood vessels expanded and the blood flow increased. The result could be seen in the blood

spurting faster from his left wrist. However, he didn't stop gathering Kei even though blood covered his feet.

The pressure of Layfon's Kei had sealed off the space around Haia, preventing him from making any evasive movement. Haia didn't escape though. He was also preparing.

The electric voice finally stopped.

Both of them took a step forward. Two blades containing huge amounts of Kei flashed. Huge noise echoed in the air. The cutting paths of the two mirrored each other and clashed. The impact of Kei destroyed the foothold of the fighters and both of them retreated.

No difference for now. Flame Cut was a move that required two swings. The pressure of Kei remained around them. Hence the first person to recover was the first to complete the move.

Flame Cut had two parts to it – strike and Shou Kei. Just like the time when Layfon executed Snake Fall, the striking power of Flame Cut was most effective when the opponent had no more variations in his move. The Shou Kei then helped to expand the power of the strike. The second strike would be made in the closest distance possible, striking at an opponent who had no more moves to make.

Both of these fighters were in the process of resisting the other's Kei. Layfon would have won if not for the injury. The amount of blood loss was preventing him from releasing the full strength of his Kei.

Layfon didn't know that Haia had a reason to win. As Layfon had said, Haia had yet to experience a fight without anyone helping him. A fight that didn't involve trusting anybody. The leader of the Gang had been living in the family that was the Mercenary Gang. However, a day would come for the Gang to disband. The people he trusted would not be around him anymore.

(I'm so unsightly, thinking of it when I'm like this.) Haia wanted to test his ability to fight alone.

Kei and Kei. Breath clashed with breath. They weaved together. The blood spurting from Layfon's left wrist painted Haia's vision red.

Layfon's Kei power slowed in one split second.

(I can win.) Haia thought. Layfon's left wrist was useless. The gathering of the huge amount of Kei increased the blood loss, and that had lowered his level of concentration. However, his expression showed no signs of impatience. His silent and emotionless pupils watched Haia.

(This guy.....)

He should be hating Haia. One for the kidnapping of Felli, and two for forcing him to take up the Katana. In fact, he was obviously outraged when he began the duel. Strangely though, his anger faded as the fight progressed, and his eyes became empty. It was even more obvious after Zuellni's victory.

Blood still gushed out of the wrist. The storm created by Layfon's Kei whipped up the blood and turned everything red.

(Does this guy not fear death?)

But those eyes had no fear in them.

Haia's Katana had no safety setting. If he managed to strike first, then Layfon would die. Even so, Layfon remained rock-firm, as if he was just an observer, watching and letting time pass.

And this was the moment when Haia finally understood what Layfon possessed. He had fought alone against mad filth monsters. Any damage to his protective suit on the hopeless, arid, pollutant-filled wild plain would bring death. Defeat meant death. To fight alone, he had to even think of how to escape alone. He had such a background. He was in a lonely world devoid of support.

(.....!)

Haia spent all his might to stop his sudden shivering. Suppressed by fear, he had missed his best chance.

The fingertip of Layfon's left hand trembled. His nerves hadn't been cut. Raising his Internal Kei to its max, he gathered all his Kei in that nerve. Just one moment was enough. Move.

This was a lonely world without support. Use his own power to win hope. Use his own power to survive.

His left wrist moved to slowly grasp hold of the blade's handle. Shou Kei increased.

"Ahhhh!"

Haia's blade was deflected. The crashing pressure of the Kei completely dominated Haia, keeping him in place.

Psyharden technique – Flame Weight.

The blade flipped to draw from Haia's shoulder downward. Skin ripped. Bones shattered. Organs were damaged. Without time to even shout, Haia was batted into the air but Layfon prepared to deal him a final blow – a blow for the throat.

(I'll probably die.....)

Haia couldn't move. Intense pain interfered with his nerves. His entire body was numb. Though he was shocked, he managed to calm down and quietly wait for it to happen. He closed his eyes.

But.....that moment didn't come. The impact didn't come.

".....?" he slowly opened his eyes, and never expected to see the glasses he was so familiar with. Tears rolled down the face of his childhood friend.

"Myunfa.....You.....What're you doing?"

Myunfa, gritting her teeth, was shielding him with her body. She had saved him while he fell from the sky, and she was now shielding him.

He saw Layfon standing behind her.

".....Hurry and escape."

He himself provoked the fight. Since he lost, it couldn't be helped that he was to die. But Myunfa was unrelated to all that had happened. He couldn't get her involved.

She shook her head desperately.

".....No."

"Don't say nonsense."

"No," she shouted and held him tighter. "I don't want to leave you! I.....made that decision long ago."

Her resolve made him speechless. He moved his gaze to Layfon. Layfon stood there for a while then gave a long sigh, releasing the Kei gathered in his body. He turned the Katana into its Dite form and turned around, preparing to leave.

"Hey!" Haia shouted.

"You are enough as the villain. I'm not interested in becoming one." He left with that excuse.

Epilogue

"Well, that's the ending?" Savaris mumbled.

Haia was a strong Military Artist, but he was too naive, losing to a Layfon with an injured left wrist. Too naive, even though he had the support of his comrades.

Savaris left the roaming bus station and headed for Zuellni's multi-legs near the contact point. That was the best place to observe the surroundings.

"It's a shame to turn weak. Well, since it's not an order, I'm not particularly sad about it."

Someone had caught up with Layfon as he headed slowly for Zuellni. Savaris squinted.

"Is it still in that girl's body?"

The Haikizoku. Savaris came to bring it back to Grendan. What would happen when he took it back? Did the Queen order him to retrieve the Haikizoku just for the sake of becoming strong.....Definitely not.

Of course, becoming strong was important, but that wasn't the key to the problem. A Heaven's Blade successor just needed to think of how to become stronger. That was the duty that Savaris had been happily carrying out. However, it wouldn't be that simple for Queen Alsheyra Almonise, the royalty who led Grendan's Heaven's Blade successors. Grendan had not one, but twelve Heaven's Blade successors whose power far exceeded anyone's. There must be something they were made to do. Probably only Grendan, the city that everyone thought of as mad, the city that possessed the prototype of all Electronic Fairies, could complete this mission.

That was why so many strong Military Artists came from Grendan. That was why Grendan's people desired power. That was why they needed the Haikizoku more than anyone else.

"Though I don't know what my generation can do, if chance presents itself, of course it'd be good for things to get more interesting," he said to himself and squinted happily.



Dragging himself slowly forward, Layfon crossed the contact point. Myath's Military Artists walked past him with downcast eyes. He averted his gaze. Sometimes, anger was focused on him, but a glance at Layfon's bloody wrist silenced Myath's people. A gust of wind could have easily blown him away. No one did anything to him.

"Layfon!"

Nina's team had finally caught up. Nina's face paled at his appearance.
"You need immediate treatment!"

"It's ok," he stopped her from calling a stretcher. He was already treating himself through Internal Kei. He had stopped the blood loss. The nerves needed to be reconnected in a hospital but he could still walk.

"Moron. Is this the time to say that! And you don't have to hold back with us....."

"Instead of me, we should check whether Felli-senpai has been safely released," he increased his pace and escaped Nina's anger.

(For now, let's try the roaming bus station where the Mercenary Gang's roaming bus is located.)

Nina didn't say anything and followed him, perhaps beaten by his lack of hesitation in the decision.

"Layfon....."

He didn't need to walk far. He walked past the crowd of joyous students and suddenly found Felli before him.

"That injury....." Felli's gaze froze at his left wrist. She had run up to him.

He squeezed out a smile. He thought he could ease her by lifting his wrist, but that was too much for him.

"Nothing much."

The amount of blood painting his clothes exposed his lie.

"You really are a fool," she said slowly, looking at his injury.

"Felli-senpai....."

"Couldn't you have fought in a more relaxed manner? Why....." Her shoulders shook. Was she crying? Was it fear that she had been suppressing while she was imprisoned?

In truth, all Felli felt was regret. She only thought of "whether Layfon will save her" rather than thinking of Layfon getting caught in a terrible fight. Hence when he appeared, sustaining a heavy injury, she thought she had to shoulder the responsibility even though she didn't directly effect the result.

Layfon put his right hand lightly on her shoulder.

"I'm really ok."

She lifted her head and he smiled. But he had lost too much blood to concentrate, neglecting the girl standing behind her.

That girl walked past Felli and slapped him on the face.

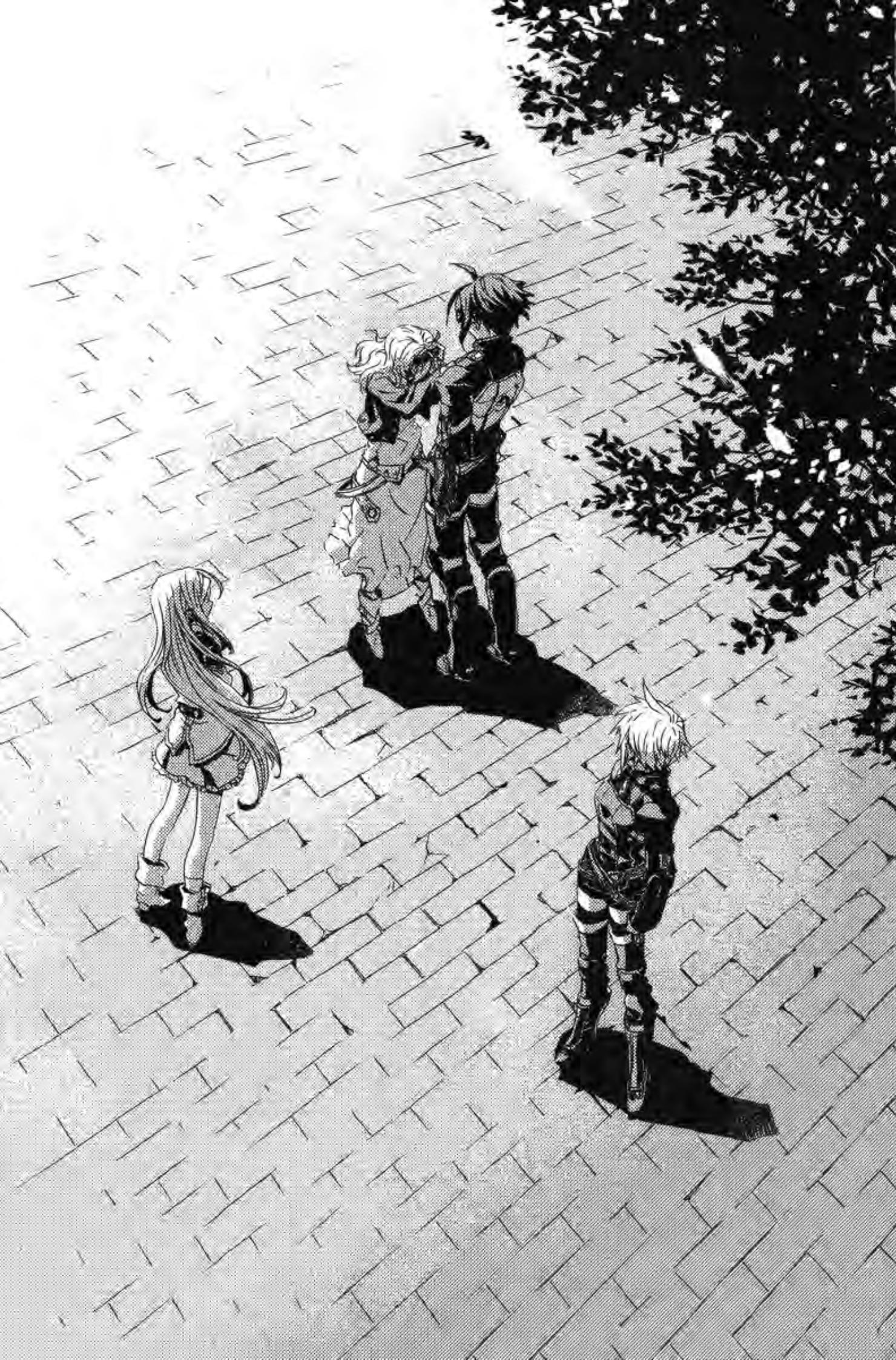
The air froze. Felli, Layfon and Nina turned speechless. Felli and even Nina failed to react to this sudden action. That wasn't it either. He thought Nina would be the one since that slap came pretty quick. But reality showed otherwise and painted an unbelievable illusion.

He lifted his head, feeling the numbness spreading on his face as he looked at the girl.

"Leerin.....?"

The female that couldn't possibly be here. His childhood friend, the big sister of the orphanage, the person who should be in Grendan was standing right in front of him! An unbelievable reality.

"Why....." He wanted to say something but didn't know where to begin.



Leerin's words flowed like a dam with a destroyed wall, her cheeks red with anger.

"Why do you always make others worry about you! Why do you always show a face that says you're shouldering everything! You're not honest at all. I don't know what you're thinking! You're always like this, bearing everything. Do you think other people are happy because you do that? Tell me!" she said in outrage, ignoring the silence around them, ignoring the confused Felli and Nina. "Don't.....make me.....worry anymore," she said, her words getting lighter.

"Is it really you, Leerin?"

An undeniable truth.

"Really....." He couldn't say anything more.

Tears leaked from Leerin's eyes. She pulled towards him and buried her head in his chest. Her shoulders shook.

"Leerin," he touched her back. This wasn't a dream.

What was he thinking at this moment.....Before that question surfaced in his mind, he felt something hot roll down his face.

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